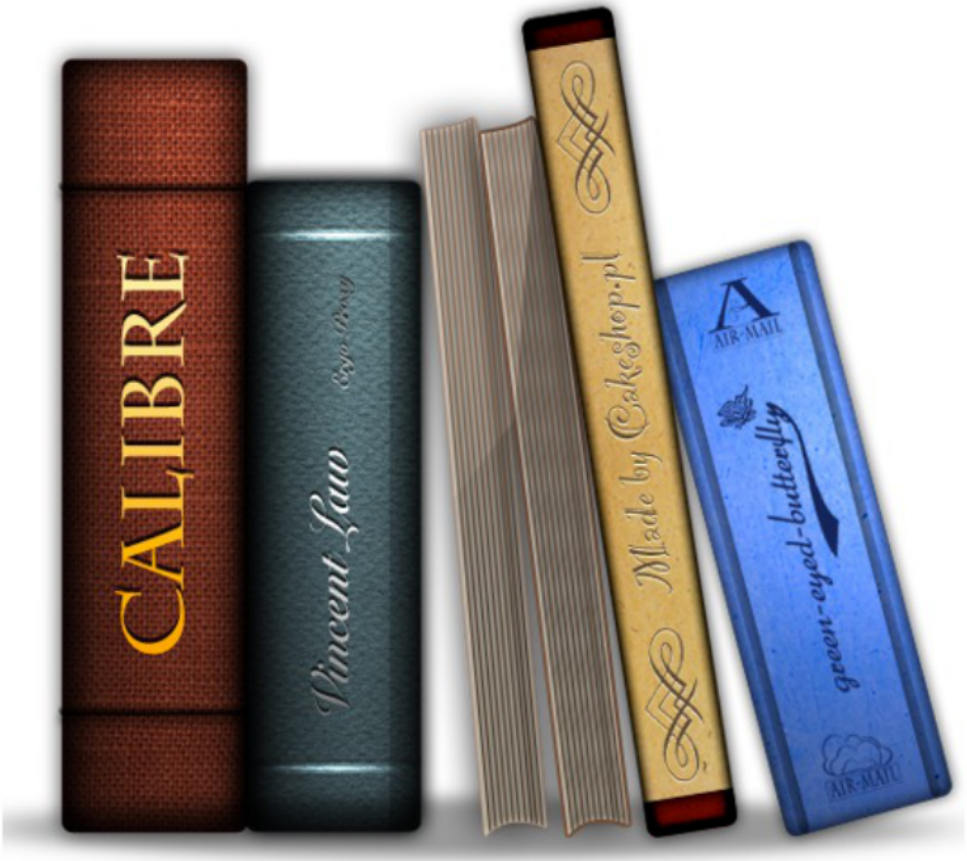
the Mystic Arts Of Erasing All Signs Of Death (2010)

Huston, Charlie



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The Mystic Arts Of Erasing All Signs Of Death

CHARLIE HUSTON

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PROLOGUE:

I'm not sure where one should expect to find the bereaved daughter of a wealthy Malibu suicide in need of a trauma cleaner long after midnight, but safe to say a trucker motel down the 405 industrial corridor in Carson was not on my list of likely locales.--Ouch. That looks painful. I touched the bandage on my forehead.--And if that's what it feels like to look at it, imagine how it feels to actually have it happen to you. The half of her face that I could see in the chained gap at the edge of the door nodded.--Yeah, I'd imagine that sucks. Cars whipped past on the highway across the parking lot, taking full advantage of the few hours in any given Los Angeles county twenty-four-hour period when you might get the needle on the high side of sixty. I watched a couple of them attempting to set a new land speed record. I looked back at Soledad's face, bisected by the door.--So?--Uh-huh? I hefted the plastic carrier full of cleaning supplies I'd brought from the van.--Someone called for maid service?--Yeah. That was me.--I know. She fingered the slack in the door chain, set it swinging back and forth.--I didn't really think you'd come.--Well, I like to surprise. She stopped playing with the chain.--Terrible habit. Don't you know most people don't like surprises? I looked over at the highway and watched a couple more cars.--Can I ask a silly question?--Sure. I looked back at her.--What the fuck am I doing here? She ran a hand through her hair, let it fall back over her forehead.--You sure

you want to do this, Web? That being the kind of question that tips most people off to a fucked up situation, I could very easily have taken it as my cue to go downstairs, get back in the van and get the hell gone. But it's not like I hadn't already been clued in to things being fucked up when she called in the middle of the night and asked me to come to a motel to clean a room. And there I was anyway. So who was I fooling? Exactly no one.--Just let me in and show me the problem.--Think you can fix it, do you? I shook my head.--No, probably not. But it's cold out here. And I came all this way. She showed me half her smile, the other half hidden behind the door.--And you're still clinging to some hope that a girl asking you to come clean something is some kind of booty call code, right? I rubbed the top of my head. But I didn't say anything. Not feeling like saying no and lying to her so early in our relationship. There would be time for that kind of thing later. There's always time for lying. She inhaled, let it out slow.--OK. The door closed. I heard the chain unhook. The door opened and I walked in, my feet crunching on something hard.--This the asshole? I looked at the young dude standing at the bathroom door with a meticulously crafted fauxhawk. I looked at bleached teeth and handcrafted tan. I looked at the bloodstains on his designer-distressed jeans and his artfully faded reproduction Rolling Stones concert T from a show that took place well before he was conceived. Then I looked at much larger bloodstains on the sheets of the queen-size bed and the flecks of blood spattered on the wall. I looked at the floor to see what I'd crushed underfoot, half expecting cockroaches, and found dozens of scattered almonds instead. I listened as the door closed behind me and locked. I watched as Soledad walked toward the bathroom and the dude snagged her by the hand before she could go in. --I asked, Is this the asshole? I pointed at myself. --Honestly, in most circumstances, in any given room on any given day I'd say, Yeah, I'm the asshole here. But in this particular scenario, and I know we just met and all, but in this room here? I pointed at him. --I'm more than willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and say that you're the asshole. He looked at Soledad. --So, yeah, he's the

asshole then? She twisted her hand free and went into the bathroom. --He's the guy I told you about. She closed the door behind her. He looked at me. --Yeah, you're the asshole alright. I held up a hand. --Hey look, if you're gonna insist, I can only accept the title. But seriously, don't sell yourself short. You got the asshole thing locked up if you want it. He came down the room in a loose strut I imagine had been meticulously assembled from endless repeat viewings of Tom Cruise's greatest hits. --Yeah, I can tell by the way you're talking. You're the one fucked with her today. Made jokes about her dad killing himself. You're the asshole alright. The toilet flushed, Soledad yelled over it. --He didn't make jokes! The dude looked at the closed door. --You said he made jokes. He looked at me. --Asshole. Fucking go in someone's home, there's been a tragedy, go in and try to make money off that. Fucking vulture. Fucking ghoul. Who does that, who comes up with that for a job? That your dream job, man? Cleaning up dead people? Other kids were hoping to grow up to be movie stars and you were having fantasies about scooping people's guts off the floor? I shifted, crushing a few more almonds. --Truth is, mostly I had fantasies about doing your mom. He slipped a lozenge of perforated steel from his back pocket, flicked his wrist and thumb in an elaborate show of coordination, and displayed the open butterfly knife resting on his palm. --Say what, asshole? Say nothing, actually. Except say that maybe he was right and I was the asshole in the room. Certainly being an asshole was how I came to be there in the first place.

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JEALOUS, BITTER, CYNICAL, HOSTILE AND PRETENTIOUS

Chev was getting in my ass.

--Give me a hand here.

--Just a sec, I wanna finish this.

--A sec my ass, get the fuck over here and give me a hand.

I got up and walked across the shop, the copy of Fangoria folded open to an article about a new wave of bootleg Eastern European ultrahorror DVDs.

--Put that down and hold this.

I lowered the magazine, looked at the girl lying frozen on the table, her shirt pulled up, one tit untucked from her bra, tension in every muscle of her body a thin stream of tears running from her eyes, flipped him off and took hold of the Glover Bulldog clamp locked on the tip of the girl's nipple, stretching it taut for the needle.

The girl banged her heel on the table.

--Don't pull on it, don't pull on it.

--I'm not pulling on it.

She squirmed.

--You're sooo pulling.

--I am not, you're moving.

I looked at Chev.

--Did I pull on it or did she move?

Chev turned from his kit, a large needle between the fingers of his left hand.

--Just hold it steady, both of you.

The girl froze.

I looked back in my magazine and read about a scene in a movie called Amputee where a guy has his eyes gouged out and his toes are amputated by the bad guy and sewn into his empty eye sockets.

--I'm holding steady.

The clamp vibrated slightly as Chev ran the needle through the girl's nipple and she jerked.

I peeked at her over the top of the magazine.

--Not too bad, huh?

Part of a smile crossed her face and she shook her head.

--No, not too bad.

I nodded.

--Yeah, here comes the bit that really sucks.

Chev twisted the jewelry into the hole he'd just put in her nipple, and gripped the ends of the open hoop of surgical steel with two pairs of needle-nose pliers, torqued until they lined up, popped a tiny bead between them and pinched them

together so they held it tight. The girl's mouth flew open and she made a long whining noise and a little urine stained the crotch of her way too fucking expensive for their own good jeans.

I looked at the photo spread in the magazine.

--See, hurts like a motherfucker.

Chev took the clamp from my fingers.

--Asshole. Get the fuck away.

--What? I was helping, you said I should come over here and help.

He released the clamp and the girl's nipple snapped back.

--Just get out of here, will you? Go get me some smokes.

I twisted the magazine into a tube and stuffed it in my back pocket.

--Give me some cash.

Chev looked up from the blood he was swabbing off the girl's tit.

--No.

--Fine, I'll tell them we're not using money anymore, that we've moved beyond outdated concepts like commerce and that they should just give me your American Spirits because

it's a goodwill society now.

He placed a gauze pad over the girl's nipple and had her hold it there while he taped the corners down.

--I gave you money for breakfast this morning and you never gave me the change. Use that in lieu of goodwill and go buy my smokes.

--Thought the change was a tip.

--It wasn't. Go. Get out.

He took a card full of cleaning instructions from his work table and handed it to the girl and started telling her how to care for the piercing, blotting her eyes for her with a Kleenex.

--You're gonna want to take the bandage off in a couple hours, in the shower with water running over it so it doesn't stick to the dry blood. Then you gotta clean it, rotate the jewelry under the water.

She made a face and he stroked her hair and she leaned her head against his hand.

--It'll be cool. It'll hurt, but not bad. The hard part is over.

I leaned against the wall by the door.

--Until mom sees it and you have to explain why the hell you let some creepy tattoo artist poke a hole in your tit.

Chev stepped away from the girl.

--Go be useful. Now.

I slid my shades over my eyes.

--I am useful. I serve a constant reminder that you're not as cool as you think you are and that you used to run home early from school every day so you wouldn't miss Star Trek and it wasn't till you shaved your head and got inked and opened this shop that chicks like her would even look at you.

--Now, out, the fuck out!

I pushed the door open.

--And you have the whole original series on deluxe DVD and an autographed William Shatner picture that you got at a convention when you were fifteen and had chronic acne.

The door swung shut behind me as I walked into the sunlight, whatever Chev was saying to me muffled and lost.

I didn't need to hear it. I'd heard it all before. Anything Chev has to say to me, I've heard it. Most of it starts with asshole and ends with such a dick.

I dug in my pocket and found the six odd bucks left over from the breakfast run I'd done over to the Denny's on Sunset. I'd planned on using it for some tacos later.

--Crap.

I stuffed the money back in my pocket and headed out.

Mostly Chev is cool. Until a chick he thinks is hot comes

around. Really, it's not any different from our whole lives. Only difference is, back when we were kids, Chev turned into a worse stuttering dork around hot chicks than he already was and tried to make up for it by being a dick toward me. He doesn't get nervous anymore, mostly, but he still acts like a dick toward me. Which, sure, sometimes I deserve it, but mostly he's just trying to be cooler than he is. So who's the dick?

I walked up Mansfield, cut east and made for the big red Las Palmas Market. I could have just gone up Melrose from the shop and gotten the smokes from the gas station at La Brea, but everything's cheaper at the Market. Save some money on Chev's smokes and there'd be enough for a soda and some gum. Chev can't ask for change I don't have.

Well, he can, but I can't give it to him. So that gets us both off the hook.

Coming back to Melrose with the smokes, I saw the girl coming out of the shop, Chev holding the door open, thumbing the digits of her phone number into his cell. I stood there and watched him watch her ass as she walked to the 2008 Z her mommy and daddy bought for her. She climbed in and waved and pulled into traffic and Chev held up his phone. I'll call.

I waved at her as I crossed the street and she punched it and almost ran me over.

Chev laughed and I walked past him and into the shop.

--Jailbait.

He let the door swing shut and caught the pack of smokes I tossed him.

--Asshole.

--Total jailbait.

He stripped the cellophane from the pack.

--Just turned eighteen. Her folks gave her the car as a birthday present.

--Bull. They gave her that car as a bribe to keep her from dropping out of high school and going up to the valley to become a porn star.

--Dude, she's eighteen. I carded her when she came in.

--Fake.

He dropped into one of the two old barber chairs customers sit in for easy arm and leg pieces.

--I know a fake when I see one. She's eighteen. Legit. And smokin' hot.

I unwrapped a piece of gum and stuck it in my mouth.

--She's a spoiled piece of high-maintenance ass that thinks it'll be cool to fuck a tattoo rocker because she's already taken it in the ass from every rich boy in Beverly Hills and variety is the spice of life and her family's money makes her life boring so she has to slum with losers like us.

He lit up and blew smoke at me.

--Losers like me, Web. Losers like me.

I took the magazine from my pocket and opened it back up.

--Well I hope you enjoy the fatal case of cockrot you're gonna get if you nail that chick. --Jealous.

--Gonna be like this movie Corrosion.

--Bitter.

--Your flesh being eaten away.

--Cynical.

--Consumed by the billions of infected sperm monkeys that have been

pumped into her by the Beverly Hills High football team since she was thirteen.

--Hostile.

--Excoriated to a nubbin with a shriveled sack hanging off it.

--Excoriated?

--Look it up.

--I know what it means.

--No you don't.

--Pretentious.

I threw the magazine at him.

--I am not fucking pretentious.

He caught the magazine and rolled it tight and counted points off his fingers with it.

--Jealous, bitter, cynical, hostile and pretentious.

I got up and grabbed at the magazine.

--And I'm not jealous, not of a rag like that.

He jerked the magazine away.

--Excoriate my ass.

--You wouldn't say that if you knew what it means.

I slapped the cigarette from his mouth into his lap and he jumped from the chair, whacking at the embers on his crotch with the magazine.

I shoved him.

--Cool it, that's a new issue.

He swatted the top of my head with it.

--You are such a dick.

--Fuck you.

I grabbed him around the middle and pushed him back into the chair and he smacked me across the ear with the magazine.

--Dick.

The string of bells hanging from the door jangled.

--Interrupting something intimate?

Chev shoved me away and got out of the chair and tossed my magazine on the couch against the wall.

I adjusted the tail of my shirt.

--Just trying to keep the romance in the relationship, man.

Po Sin stood in the doorway, using every bit of his huge roundness to blot out the sunlight behind him.

--Couple that's been together as long as you two, guess you must have to resort to the rough stuff. Me and the missus, we can mostly get by with a little dirty talk and Kama Sutra Oil.

I fell onto the couch, put my feet up on the arm and opened my magazine.

--Yeah, but you guys are pretty much newlyweds compared to us. I mean, me and Chev, we've been together like over twenty years, like since we were five or so. You guys been married how long?

--Hardly thirteen years, man. Like yesterday.

Chev lit a fresh cigarette.

--Don't listen to that fag, Po Sin, he's always creeping in my room at night, but he never gets any.

I turned a page.

--True, he is a bit of a tease.

Po Sin nodded and moved from the door, came to the middle of the shop and occupied it.

--Well, that's enough fagging around for me. You got your canister?

Chev started cleaning up the paper towels and bloody swabs from the nipple piercing, and jerked his head at me.

--Go get the can.

--Fuck you. 'M I your slave?

He stuffed the garbage into a red biohazard bag and pulled the sealed plastic magazine from the sharps disposal on the wall.

--You're my burden. You're my cross. My goddamned albatross and you haven't paid rent in two months and I fed you this morning, again, and you abused another one of my clients today and you can get off your ass and go get the can or get the fuck out and go look for a job.

I threw the magazine on the couch and pushed myself up and made for the back of the store.

--Your wife rag like this, Po Sin?

He shook his head.

--My lady, she beams messages to me through her eyes. She don't got to rag on me.

--Lucky man.

--So says you.

I went in the back of the shop and got the red biowaste canister and brought it out front. Chev handed me the bag he was holding. I went to drop it in the canister and a wad of bloody paper towels fell on the floor. I bent to pick them up.

--Not with your bare hands, not with your bare hands.

I looked at Po Sin.

--It's no big deal, it's just dry blood.

I grabbed the wad and dropped it in the canister with the rest of the waste.

He pulled at the waistband of his navy blue Dickies.

--Could have been a needle in the middle of that.

I slid him the canister.

--There wasn't.

--And you never know what's growing in blood. Living in it.

I showed him my hands.

--Too late now.

He looked at Chev and Chev shrugged. He shook his head and lifted the canister and considered.

--Ten pounds.

Chev shook his head.

--Eight, man, at the most.

Po Sin set the canister down.

--Got a scale handy?

--A scale? It look like I got a scale around here?

--Well, in the absence of a scale, I'm the expert. And the expert says this is ten pounds of biohazardous waste and at

two bucks a pound you owe me twenty bucks.

Chev picked up the canister.

--Telling you, this is eight, tops. Sixteen bucks.

Po Sin adjusted his tiny oval wirerims with his thick stubby fingers.

--Chev, do we have a contract?

Chev scratched the stubble on the side of his head.

--No.

--So, I don't charge you a weekly rate, then, for picking this shit up, I don't charge you the same forty-nine fifty a week minimum I charge everyone else on my route. Is that right?

Chev looked at the ceiling. --Yeah.

--I charge you a pound rate that I usually charge only to people that bring their own shit by and drop it off themselves, right?

Chev reached for the big leather wallet attached to his belt by a dangling steel chain.

--OK, OK.

--I mean, if I'm not doing you a solid here, if you'd rather do business in the manner of most of my clients, we can draw

up a contract and I'll be here rain or shine on my appointed rounds every week and you can pay the pickup rate whether you have waste or not.

Chev opened the wallet and started pulling out bills.

--Got it. My bad.

--If you'd prefer that over, say, busting my balls for the sake of four bucks, I can go out to the van and get the paperwork right now. That suit you?

Chev held out two tens.

--No, man, no, here, here it is, it's cool, my bad.

Po Sin reached out and pinched the bills between his thumb and forefinger and tugged them from Chev's hand.

--Why thank you for your prompt and courteous payment.

Chev stuffed the wallet back in his pocket and pointed at the koi tattooed on Po Sin's forearm.

--Shit, man, not I like don't hit you with a discount on your ink.

Po Sin tucked the money into the breast pocket of his unbuttoned Clean Team Trauma work shirt.

--True. And it's also not like I ever beef with you about what you charge when I get the bro rate.

Chev nodded his head, put out his hand.

--No, man, you're right, I was out of line.

Po Sin folded his hand around Chev's.

--It's cool, just the ways and means of business. Four bucks is just four bucks, but, then again, it's four bucks. If you get me.

Chev looked at the number on the face of his vibrating cell.

--Yeah, don't got to tell me. Small business owners of the world unite.

He hooked a thumb at me where I'd sprawled back on the couch with my magazine.

--Wish you could teach some economics to the freeloader over there.

I didn't look away from the magazine.

--Indentured servant is more like it.

He ignored me, answering the phone and flipping open the appointment book on the counter at the front of the shop.

--Yeah, what did you want?

He rolled his eyes.

--A dolphin? In the small of your back?

He stuck a finger in his open mouth.

--Yeah, no problem. How about tomorrow afternoon?

Po Sin came over and peeked at my magazine.

--That guy got toes for eyes? --Yeah. Cool, huh?

--He a monster?

--Nah, just a guy gets all fucked up by a psycho.

--What you see in that shit, man?

--I don't know.

--Doesn't bother you, all that gore?

--Why should it?

He looked at Chev.

--Why should it? He always been like that?

Chev put his hand over the phone.

--Actually, no. The taste for horror is kind of a new thing.

I looked up from the magazine.

--Hey is there a problem here I'm unaware of? Am I not allowed to develop new interests and tastes? So I never really got into horror before, so it's a new thing, is that supposed to mean something? I mean, fuck, it's just fun is all.

Po Sin grunted.

--People getting hacked up and tortured and mutilated is fun. Shit's disgusting.

I put the magazine in front of my face.

--Says the man with a van full of bloody rags and dirty needles and shit-stained sheets and used condoms and wads of tampons.

He pulled the magazine from my hands and flipped through it, looking at the pictures.

--Some nasty stuff in here.

--Doesn't bother me.

He looked at me, nodded, and kicked the side of the biohazard canister.

--Give me a hand with this. Come out and get the empty.

I rolled off the couch.

--Like I'm everyone's slave today.

Chev was scribbling in the appointment book, back on the

phone.

--With a sunset behind it, yeah, sure.

I followed Po Sin out the door.

--Ask her if she wants the dolphin snagged in a gill net or drowning in an oil spill.

Chev showed me his middle finger.

Outside, Po Sin was at the back of the Clean Team van, opening the doors. I set the canister on the edge of the curb.

He waved me closer.

--Bring it here.

I picked it back up.

--Maaan.

I brought it over to him and caught a face-full of the reek pouring out of the sun-baked rear of the van.

--Holy Jesus! Motherfuck.

He took the canister from me and snugged it in with several others and snapped a bungee cord around them to keep them from shifting.

--How's that for a gross-out?

I waved a hand in front of my face.

--Dude, that's some nasty shit.

He took an empty canister from a rack and passed it to me.

--Things are supposed to be airtight.

--They're not.

--No shit.

He slammed the doors closed and leaned his back against them, the polarized lenses of his glasses darkening.

--So. Still no work.

I lifted the empty canister.

--Working plenty.

Chev came out of the shop and lit up.

--Don't listen to him, he ain't worked in over a year.

Po Sin looked up at the sky.

--Been that long?

I spat in the gutter.

--It's been awhile.

I pointed at Chev.

--And don't listen to his bullshit. I work all the time. I mean, who's been doing the laundry? Cleaning the dishes? Cooking? Who's been running all your errands and fetching lunch and taking your truck to be washed?

Chev knocked ash from his smoke.

--Yeah, and who's been paying your rent and covering the groceries and the PG&E and the cable and the water and the gas and every other little thing that comes up?

--I've been kicking in.

Chev watched a couple Korean girls in midi tank tops walk out of the French cafe up Melrose.

--Mean your mom's been kicking in.

--Any of your business?

The girls disappeared into a shoe store and he looked back at me.

--Only that she's not gonna carry you forever and you need to get a fucking job because the IOUs are piling up on the fridge.

--I'll get a job.

Po Sin tugged the end of his thin drooping moustache.

--Can't believe you can't get a job the way the schools need teachers.

Chev flicked his butt.

--He can get a job, they call him all the time. He could sub five days a week. He could go full-time again whenever he wants.

--Only I don't want to, asshole.

--You want to make a couple bucks, I got some work for a guy with a strong stomach for messed up shit.

I looked at Po Sin and squinted.

--What kind of work?

He looked at Chev and pointed at me.

--Know why he doesn't have a job? Because he's the kind of guy you offer him one and he asks what the work is.

He started for the cab of the van.

--He don't want to work.

I followed him around the van.

--I didn't say I don't want to work, I just asked what the job is.

Asking what the job was, that was actually a really smart idea. If I'd pursued that line of questioning a bit further, things would have been considerably less complicated. Dug a little deeper into that line of inquiry, and I might have avoided the whole Who's the Asshole in the Motel Room contest that would crop up later.

But Po Sin wasn't interested in filling in blanks.

He stopped and faced me.

--It's cleaning shit up, is what it is. We got a packrat gig and one of my sets of hands is flaking on me and there's a load of shit to haul.

I squinted again.

--You mean literal shit?

--I mean stuff. Ten bucks an hour for hauling stuff. You want or not?

Chev came around the front of the van.

--He wants.

--Hey!

Chev put a finger in my face.

--He wants because the fridge is empty and it's his turn to fill it and I'm gonna start eating all my meals out so there's nothing for him to graze on, so if he wants to eat this week he'll take the job.

Po Sin took a notepad from his back pocket and started scribbling with a nub of pencil from behind his ear.

--Good. Here's the address.

He handed me the paper.

--Seven in the AM. NO later.

--No problem, just swing by and pick me up.

Midway pulling himself up behind the wheel, Po Sin stopped.

--Pick you up? My ass. Drive yourself.

Chev shook his head.

--He doesn't have a car.

--I have a car.

--No, you don't.

--Yes I do. I have a great car. I have a classic nineteen-seventy-two Dat-sun five-ten.

--You have car parts. You do not, in fact, have a car.

--Yes I do. I have parts in sufficient quantity and variety that when assembled in their proper order they will constitute a car. I have, de facto, a car.

--You have a de facto pile of scrap in the driveway is what you have, dude.

Po Sin turned the key and the van started up.

--The bus is a buck fifty. You got a buck fifty?

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, looked somewhere else.

--I don't ride the bus.

Po Sin pointed at the number 10 stop, up at the corner.

--Public transportation is a wonderful thing. Saves money, saves the environment. Gets you to a paying job. Take the bus.

I started to open my mouth and Chev stepped in.

--He's not riding the bus, Po Sin. He doesn't like the bus.

Po Sin looked at him. Looked at me. Looked away.

--Right. My bad. Thought maybe that had changed.

He looked at his watch.

--OK, I got a guy on the job, he can pick you up on the way. Be out front at six thirty and he'll grab you.

Chev butted me with his shoulder.

--Yeah, I'll get him up and make sure he has his sack lunch and everything.

Po Sin pulled the door closed and put the van in gear.

--So, see you tomorrow. And wear your boots, there tend to be sharps all over the floor on these jobs.

The van pulled from the curb and we walked back up to the front of the shop.

Chev put his arm around my shoulders.

--Your first real job. Me and your mom are so proud.

--Fuck you, I'm not going. I'll call Po Sin later and tell him not to send the guy.

--Yes, you are going. And to celebrate, me and your mom are gonna fuck like bunnies tonight.

I shrugged his arm off.

--Don't, man, that's not cool.

--Gonna fuck and fuck and fuck all night long.

--Dude, you're grossing me out.

He stopped at the door, pumping his groin at me.

--Gonna git our fuck aaawwwnnn.

I walked past him into the shop and locked the door. He grabbed the handle and shook it.

--Let me in, dick.

On the counter, his phone began to buzz and I picked it up.

--Want me to get it?

He stuck his finger against the glass.

--Do not answer that.

I looked at the number.

--Caller unknown. Probably a customer. Let me get this for you.

--Do not pick that up.

I flipped the phone open.

--White Lightning Tattoo.

Chev jammed a hand in his pocket, going for his keys.

--Asshole!

I nodded my head, phone at my ear, backing from the door.

--A string of barbed wire? Around your biceps? Yeah, sure, we can do that.

Chev turned the key.

--Do not say another word.

I covered the mouthpiece with my hand.

--No, it's cool, I can handle this.

He pushed the door open.

--Give me the phone.

I took my hand from the mouthpiece.

--Sure, sure, we can do that wire around your arm. We can also tattoo lameass foser wannabe on your forehead.

Chev came at me, grabbing for the phone.

I held it over my head, screaming.

--Or how about you just get a unicorn on your hip so people will know what a real man you are!

Chev snagged my wrist.

--Asshole.

I jerked my hand free, yelling at the phone.

--Or a rainbow on your ankle!

And it flew from my hand and hit the polished cement floor and cracked open and the screen shattered into five pieces.

We stood there and looked at the phone.

I toed one of the pieces.

--So, I guess I won't be blowing off Po Sin in the morning.

THE LAST TIME I'D SEEN HER

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

Chev's mom and dad are dead.

Which is why I can't make jokes about fucking his mom when he starts making jokes about fucking mine. It's also why he's constantly in my ass about calling my mom and being nicer to her and being more responsible so she doesn't have to worry about me. Like my mom worries. Like she can retain a single coherent thought long enough to work up a good worry. Not that I want to rag on her or anything, I mean, she's my mom. But life hasn't disrupted her mellow since, like, 1968. How is anything I do or say gonna break that trend?

Chev doesn't see it that way. Which makes sense. You take someone who doesn't have something themselves, they're always gonna put more value on it than the person who does have it. So, sure, I love my mom. But Chev may love her a little more than me. Which is maybe not as fucked up as it sounds like at first.

--Hey Mom.

--Who is it?

--It's me, Mom.

--Web? Is that you?

--It's me, Mom.

--Cool. That's cool.

There was a pause. A long one. This might mean she was:

A) Waiting for me to tell her why I was calling,

or

B) So stoned she had forgotten I was on the line.

--So, Mom.

--Who is this?

Which was pretty much a dead giveaway that the answer was B.

--It's Web, Mom.

--Heeey Web. How you doing, baby?

--I'm cool, Mom, how about you?

--Alright, alright. The blackberries are ripening nicely.

--That's cool.

--Yeah. I could send you a couple quarts. Or some pies. Should I send you

some pies?

Every time I talk to Theodora Goodhue of Wild Blackberry Pie Farms, she offers to send me some of her world-famous, all organic, bush-ripened blackberries. Or some of her equally famous pies. Then she hangs up the phone and, her short-term memory impeded as it is by the intake of her far more famous Wild Blackberry Cannabis Sativa, she promptly forgets.

--No, that's cool. I still have some of the last batch you sent.

--The crop's gonna be something special this year.

I never have any illusions about which crop she's talking about. Mom may have dropped out and headed to Oregon to pursue her dream, one in a long line of dreams, to start an organic berry farm, but it was only when she started cultivating some of her land with seedlings supplied by a friend from upper Humboldt County that her operation showed a profit and became self-sufficient. Not that she cares about the profit part of the equation.

--I'm sure it is. Hey you know, I got to roll here soon, but I wanted to ask you something.

--You go on. We can talk later.

--Sure, but I wanted to ask something first.

--Sure, baby sure.

--Chev got in a little fender bender and he's, you know, embarrassed to ask, but I knew you'd want to help if you could, so I wanted to ask if you could help him out with the repairs. And stuff.

I sat at the kitchen table, playing with the phone cord, looking at the bills stuck to the fridge with magnets, my share of each bill circled heavily in red. A thick sheaf of IOUs clipped to a magnet all their own. My signature at the bottom of each.

Mom inhaled deeply, exhaled long and slow. A cloud of smoke no doubt drifting to the ceiling.

--What about Chev, baby is he OK?

--Yeah, he's fine. But his truck, you know.

--Yes. I know. I know, Webster.

Webster. The name my dad picked. As opposed to the name she wanted. Fillmore. Not for the president, mind you, for the rock venue where they met. Webster, the name she hates to use now. Because it's a reminder that they ever met anyplace at all.

Crap.

--If you could help it would really… help.

--Webster.

--Yeah, Mom.

--Do you need money?

--Well, yeah, I can always use. But that's not why, I mean, Chev is the one. I mean.

--Webster Fillmore Goodhue.

Oh, double crap.

--Yes?

--Do you need money?

Stoned as a sixty-year-old Deadhead, berry growing, commune founding, transcendentalist yogi pot cultivator can get, Mom still sees right through me. Part of the science of being a mom.

Again, crap.

--Yeah. I do.

--Well. I wish you would just ask.

--Yeah.

--Well?

More crap.

--Mom. Can you send me some money?

--Of course I can.

--Thanks, Mom.

--Web, Web, I wish you'd call me Thea.

--It's weird. I don't like it.

--Chev does.

--Chev's not your son.

--Not biologically.

I looked at the photographs stuck on the fridge next to the bills. Looked at the one of me and Chev up in Oregon with Mom three years ago. Me on one side, Chev on the other, Mom, almost as big as Po Sin, between us. A joint between her lips. Three years ago. The last time I'd seen her.

--I just don't like calling you Thea, Mom. That's not gonna change. I'm almost thirty and it's not gonna change. OK?

--Of course it's OK. I just wish you would.

--I know. So. OK. I'm gonna go. I gotta go … do something.

--Web.

My turn to pause.

--Yeah.

--I could send you a ticket. A plane ticket, I mean. You could come up. For the harvest. Spend some time. Get a break from that place. Breathe some different air. Be away from all the unbalanced energy still floating around you.

--I don't need a break.

--But if you're not working anyway, you should think about shifting your position over the center point. You know, the earth, she knows where you are, and you can change her attitude toward you just by changing your physical location on her skin.

--Yeah. Sure, Mom, I know that, but the thing is, I am working. I'm working for a guy me and Chev know. Just that the job's just starting so I need some extra cash.

--You can have whatever you want, baby. You know that.

Sometimes it's hard to know if she means that literally. Like as a philosophy or something. The kind of thing she would tell me when she tucked me in at night when we lived in the house in Laurel Canyon, before she took off. You can have anything, Web, anything you want. You just have to want it, wish for it, dream it, and it will happen. That's how I got you. I wished for you and there you were. A story that ignored the fact that she got pregnant with me one night when she was so fucked up she forgot to put in her diaphragm. At least that's what my dad told me.

--I know.

--I'll put some money in the mail. And those berries. And a couple pies.

--Great, Mom. That's great.

--I love you, Web.

--Love you, Mom.

Another long pause.

--Love you, Mom.

And the sound of the phone hanging up.

She never forgets the money. Not sure why that is. Some part of the mothering instinct that won't let her fully relax until the cub is cared for. Or something. I mean, it may be a month before it shows up, and there's no telling what she'll send (could be whatever is in her purse when she drives past the post office on a trip into town, or it could be a rubber-banded roll of twenties in a FedEx envelope, no note, just the cash), but she'll send it.

But no berries or pie. Which will bum Chev out more than it will me. That's him missing things he didn't have.

I put the phone back in the cradle. It's a big yellow Bakelite phone with big old push buttons. I'd found it in a pile of garbage someone left at the curb when they moved out of the building, and took it inside and tinkered with it till it worked. The timing had been excellent because the night

before Chev had come home with a girl he'd been seeing and after they screwed he had broken up with her and she'd thrown our cordless at him and it'd broke. She wasn't so much pissed at being dumped as that he'd waited till he got off, but before she did, to do it. Anyway, the way we go through phones, a heavy-duty model is the best bet. As long as it doesn't get thrown at anyone.

I looked in the fridge and the cupboards, but there wasn't really anything to eat. Just half a box of oatmeal, some brown iceberg, a big can of coffee beans, a bunch of takeout condiment packets of catsup and mayo and soy sauce and duck sauce, a frosted bag of Green Giant peas, and some crusty brown rice left over from a Genghis Cohen doggy bag.

I thought about putting the rice in the microwave and mixing it with the duck sauce, but did the dishes instead. Then I emptied the wet grounds from the coffeemaker, ground some fresh beans and put them in the hopper and filled the reservoir with water. The linoleum in the kitchen was gritty so I sprayed window cleaner on it and gave it a mop. Then I got the vacuum from the hall closet and ran it over the brown wall-to-wall semi-shag.

I really do take care of the cleaning and the cooking.

Then I sat in the canvas director's chair in the living room and cycled through the 157 TV channels a few dozen times without watching anything for more than two or three minutes at a time. Then it was close to six. The sky was still bright and the air hadn't started to cool yet and I'd gotten a little sweaty cleaning, so I unbuttoned my shirt and walked around the apartment. I rearranged some books on the shelves that covered two of the livingroom walls. Chev had borrowed a couple of my biographies, Houdini and Groucho, and put them on his shelf, and put some of his volumes of ReSearch on mine. I put them where they belonged. Then I

stood there and flipped a few pages of one of his back issues of Gearhead and looked at the clock, but it was just a few minutes after six now. I put the magazine back and went in the bathroom and stared at the tub and thought about cleaning it. It was gonna be a biiig job and I didn't feel like it. But I thought about it for awhile.

I looked at the clock again. Just a few more minutes had passed.

It would be getting busy at the shop soon. I could walk over and give Chev a hand shooing out the kids and keeping the drunks in line. I could go down to my parking space in the driveway and uncover the 510 I bought last summer and take the boxes of parts out of the backseat and the trunk and start working on it. I could turn on my computer and play a game.

I looked at the clock and it was just about six thirty.

So I brushed my teeth and got undressed and lay down on the futon mattress on the floor of my room and read the rest of my Fangoria and then it was seven and I turned out the light. The homeless couple living in the alley behind our building were drunk and screaming at each other, so I listened to them for a little, and then I fell asleep and I slept for eleven hours straight.

Which was several hours less than I'd slept in months.

CODE ENFORCEMENT

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

I forgot to set my alarm clock. Which was OK because

Chev didn't forget to set his and snuck into my room and put it on my pillow when he came home from the shop.

After I spent a minute banging it against the floor to get it to stop buzzing, I swore revenge and crawled back under my covers. Then the phone started ringing. Very loud and just outside my bedroom door. It rang. And it kept ringing. And it kept ringing. And I got up and opened the door and picked it up.

--What? What the fuck?

--Is this Web?

--Yeah, what the fuck?

--Yeah, my name is Curtis.

--What do you want, Curtis?

--Nothing. I was in White Lightning last night and I got this boss Tas-manian devil on my shoulder and the guy, Chev, he said he'd knock twenty bucks off the price if I got up at six and called you and made sure you were up.So?

--What?

--You up?

I hung up the phone and threw it across the hall and it put a dent in Chev's door and I heard laughing behind it.

--Fuck you, Chev. Fuck you!

But I was up so I turned on the coffeemaker and got in the shower.

The Cutlass Cruiser station wagon idled at the curb, all gloss black paint, buffed chrome and dark tinted windows. One of the windows slid down and a driver just a shade lighter than his car looked out from behind mirrored sunglasses.

--Web?

I pulled my hoodie tighter around my body the morning air still carrying a chill.

--Yeah.

The driver tilted his head at the passenger seat.

--Let's get rollin'.

His window zipped up and I walked around the car. He pushed the door open and took a black suit coat from the passenger seat so I could sit. I climbed in, glancing at the rear of the cruiser where the back seats had been removed to make room for a gurney. And stashed just behind the front seats, a tightly packed bedroll and three milk crates filled with various pieces of camp gear tucked neatly on the floorboards. Coleman stove and lantern, hand generator emergency band radio, tent bag, ground tarp, a coffee can of rattling iron stakes, four small red fuel bottles, shrink-wrapped bundle of flares, boxes of waterproof matches, a hatchet with a well-worn leather handle, binoculars, a large plastic canteen, an Army surplus mess kit in a nylon pouch, a black cast-iron skillet with a heat-warped bottom. And more.

I pulled the door closed.

--Going on a trip this weekend?

He dug a finger behind one lens of his glasses and rubbed an eye.

--Do me a favor and buckle up, OK?

I pulled the seatbelt over my shoulder and lap and clipped the silver tongue into the buckle.

He stuck out his hand.

--Gabe.

I took his hand, calluses on his palm scratching my skin.

--Web.

He loosened his black tie and undid the top button of his white short sleeve shirt.

--Some coffee there if you want it.

I took the large white cardboard cup from the holder clipped to the dash.

--Thanks.

He put the car in drive and pulled from the curb.

--No problem. Didn't know how you liked it. Some creamers in the glove box.

I opened the glove box and found a couple creamers bouncing around on top of registration papers weighted down by a huge ring of at least a hundred keys, and a thick flipper of leather with a little plastic handle jutting from it. I closed the box and peeled back the top of my creamer and poured it in my cup.

Gabe pointed at the paper bag in the middle of the front seat.

--Garbage in there.

I dropped the empty creamer in the bag.

He drove us a couple blocks up Mansfield, past several two-story apartment buildings stacked like stucco cakeboxes in pink, aqua, terracotta, yellow and mint. Across Fountain the street gentrified slightly into a sprinkle of trendified craftsmans and renovated 1930s Spanish revival apartment blocks that were going to be squeezing out the drifters at the BHS Hollywood Recovery Center in due course. He stopped at the corner next to the Off Broadway Shoe Warehouse, and I watched some skater kids across the street working the steps of the Liberal & Household Arts Building at Hollywood High. He found a hole in the commute traffic and turned right, the Hollywood Hills rising just north of us, early summer smog settled on their tops. We started and stopped our way down past a few motels and strip clubs and stopped for the light at Highland.

A school bus crossed the intersection.

I closed my eyes for a moment, when I opened them it

was gone. I looked down the street, knowing it must have just turned the corner, but unable to keep myself from thinking other thoughts. Thinking about the Flying Dutchman. Ghost ships. Haunted freighters, lost souls that manifest and dissolve, unbidden. Just the usual.

The light changed and I sipped my coffee.

--So where we headed?

Gabe glanced at his right blind spot and changed lanes.

--Koreatown. Code enforcement. Second day. Guy had stuff piled floor to ceiling. No egress. Blocked himself out of his own bathroom. Been filling gallon milk jugs with piss. Shitting in little individual ziplock bags.

--Ah, man, Po Sin said it wasn't a real shit job!

He looked at me, my face reflected in the mirrored lenses below the deep, horizontally scored forehead and cropped graying hair.

He looked back at Sunset.

--He lied.

Po Sin was waiting when we got there, studying several large red splotches of paint on the back and sides of his Clean Team van.

He watched us get out of Gabe's wheels and pointed at the van.

--Motherfucker.

Gabe walked over, pulling the tie from his neck and folding it into a neat roll that he tucked in his pocket. He touched the paint with the tip of his finger, leaving a slight imprint.

--Couple hours after midnight. Maybe three or four AM.

Po Sin kicked one of the van's tires.

--Motherfucker.

I took a look. The paint covered the name of the company on both sides of the van and dripped down over the phone number and web address.

--That sucks.

Po Sin turned his face to the sky.

--Motherfucker!

Gabe picked a scrap of yellow rubber that was stuck in the paint.

--Water balloon.

--Motherfucking water balloon!

--Where was it parked?

Po Sin pointed north.

--At the shop. Around back. They didn't just drive by and heave one out the window, they parked, got out, walked around, and pelted it. Only reason they didn't get the windshield was because I had it nosed in against the fence back there.

--No one at the shop?

Po Sin walked to the back of the van, taking a set of keys from his pocket.

--Someone was supposed to be at the shop. Someone was sure as hell supposed to be at the motherfucking shop!

He pointed a finger at the sky.

--They're asking for it. There is no denying they are asking for it! And they are going to fucking get it!

Gabe hooked a thumb in a belt loop of his black slacks.

--How you want to go about it?

Po Sin looked down from the sky.

--Eye for an eye.

Gabe took the sunglasses from his face. Crease-cornered eyes, the faded black outline of a tear tattooed beneath the left. He nodded.

--OK, I'll make some calls.

Po Sin looked again at the van.

--Motherfucker.

He unlocked the van and opened the rear doors.

--Let's get to work.

He pulled out three white packets and handed one to me and one to Gabe. I watched them shake theirs out until they unfolded into paper jumpsuits. Po Sin's the size of a mainsail, Gabe's meant for a normal human. I did the same and stepped into mine and watched how they tied the flaps on theirs. I was tying mine closed when I heard a long loud rip and watched Po Sin pull a huge roll of duct tape around and around his ankle, sealing the leg of the Tyvek suit to the top of the plastic shoe cover he'd slipped over his boot. He did the same with his other ankle. And then both wrists. And then the neck. He passed the tape to Gabe who did likewise.

Gabe offered me the tape.

--Do it yourself, or need a hand?

I got taped up and hooded and Gabe showed me how to fit the goggled filter mask over my mouth and nose and I followed him into the hotel, Po Sin trailing behind us, glancing back at his vandalized van.

--Motherfucker.

The roaches swarmed me. The first bag I shifted disturbed their routine and they swarmed me, simultaneously revealing what my feet had been crunching on when I walked into the dark apartment, and what the constant background rustling

sound was caused by.

So I freaked a little.

A couple hundred cockroaches come spilling out of the shit-encrusted nooks and crannies of a dead shut-in's festering den and start racing each other up your legs to see which can be the first to crawl in your facial orifices and see if you don't freak.

Po Sin watched the freaking. Stood there with his arms folded, framed by towers of piled trash and bundled newspapers and plastic gallon milk jugs filled with urine, and watched all the cockroaches in creation crawling on me trying to find holes they could climb into.

--Can't handle this, you can't handle the job.

He stood in front of me, his torso being populated by swarms of roaches combining into continents, pieces breaking off and drifting and forming with other masses. The geophysical history of the earth enacted by roaches on a globe of a man.

He extended an arm and elegantly brushed a few from the sleeve of his Tyvek.

--Worse things to be covered in, man. Let me tell you.

Gabe walked past me, edging down the open corridor between the piles of refuse, making for the dim light at the back of the place where they'd excavated a couple windows the day before.

--Lots worse things.

He disappeared, lost in bugs and towering waste.

Po Sin watched me.

And, not wanting to at all, I thought about worse things.

Po Sin crunched over.

--OK?

The legs of one of the roaches tickled the exposed rim of skin running between my filter mask and the edge of the Tyvek hood. I flicked it to the floor and stomped on it. And, incidentally, about a dozen more.

--Yeah, I'm fine. You're a dick, but I'm fine.

He nodded and pointed toward the back of the apartment.

--Then head back there. Gabe is bagging the shit. Start hauling it down to the service elevator.

I started down the hall, the smell of rancid crap already seeping through the mask.

--You suck, Po Sin!

Appearing in front of me, Gabe shook his head.

--Here's the thing. You don't want to yell like that. It will break the seal of your mask around your chin and jaw. They'll get in. You take off the mask to get them off and

they'll be all over your face. Be in your nostrils.

Roaches in your nostrils. Pretty bad. But still, like I say, there are worse things.

So I got to work.

I hauled shitbags. A lot of them. The shut-in who lived in the place, he must have shit like a dozen times a day. He must have eaten nothing but beans and broccoli and topped it off with Mueslix.

Hauling the big black garbage bags filled with little bags filled with shit between the teetering masses of putrefying garbage, the smell of fermenting waste in my nose hairs, I tried to do some math. I tried to figure out how many years the guy must have been shitting in bags to create this kind of poundage.

I took another load of the bags down in the service elevator and out the back to the bin Po Sin had rented for the job and had parked in the alley. My face itched under the mask and I wanted to take it off, but I knew the reek coming off the bags would kill me without some kind of protection. I started taking bags from the dolly I had piled them on and began flinging them over the side of the bin.

I tried to remember how much Chev said a new cellphone was gonna cost. Almost two hundred. At least twenty hours of shit-flinging to pay that off.

Crap.

One of the bags snagged a flange of steel at the top of the bin and tore open and little ziplocks of shit spilled down onto

the asphalt.

--Crap!

I bent and started picking them up.

Three hours in, and my back and knees and arms and shoulders were killing me. I remembered my dad and his cronies sitting out on the porch behind the Laurel Canyon house, sipping bourbon and water and playing Worst Job Ever. All trying to one-up the others.

Gas-pump jockey.

Bellhop.

Stable boy.

Cabby.

Janitor.

Cow inseminator.

Night watchman.

High school teacher.

That last one from my dad. The trump that beat everyone and ended the game in laughter. Nearly all of them having been public school teachers at some time or other before they got involved with the movie business.

Wish I could get a round of that game going. Put some money on it. I'd clean up.

Shitbag flinger.

--Ho, who's that on shitbag duty?

I looked up at the guy coming down the alley tying himself into a Tyvek.

--Who's the man behind the mask?

He came close, tugging at the shoulder seams of the Tyvek, trying to get the garment to give some breathing room to the thick muscle wadded around his neck and arms and torso.

He stopped.

--Hey. Who? Who the fuck are you?

I tossed a bag of shit into the bin.

--Who the fuck are youi

He ducked his head back.

--What?

I pointed at my face.

--Sorry, I got this mask on, it must have garbled my use of the spoken word. Allow me to employ sign language.

I crooked my index finger into a question mark.

--Who.

I held up my middle finger.

--The fuck.

I pointed at him.

--Are you?

He pushed his head forward.

--The fuck you think you are?

I shook my head.

--No, see, we're still having communication problems here. It must be because I'm speaking English and you're speaking Dickanese.

He grabbed the finger I had aimed at him and pulled up on it.

--What?

Pain shot up my arm and my knees started to fold. I quickly calculated how much harder it would be to fling shit with one of my index fingers snapped off, and how much longer it would take to pay off Chev's new cellphone, and made a strategic decision about how to handle the situation.

--Whoa, whoa, man! Whoa, my bad! Just foolin' around! That hurts, man. Easy big guy, my bad. Uncle. Uncle!

He gave my finger a twist and let go.

--That's right you call uncle. Fuck with me, smart ass.

I flexed the finger, making sure it would still fling shit.

--Yeah, that's me, smart ass. It's a habit.

He tilted his head as far as his neck would allow.

--You still trying to be funny?

I shook my head.

--No, man, I'm not. Seriously. I mean, I wasn't trying to be funny in the first place, I was just trying to communicate on your level. Sincerely.

He grabbed my finger again and I went to my knees in the little bags of shit, many of them popping open under me. From the corner of my eye I saw several roaches that had been clinging to me bailing off, abandoning the ship that was clearly going down.

He added torque to the back pressure on the finger and I fell to my side in the shitbags.

He stood over me, straddling my body and the crap piled beneath me.

--Man, you are funny. You are so fucking funny, you know what I did, you're so funny?

I writhed, trying to take some of the tension off my finger.

He gave it a jerk.

--I said, You know what I did, you're so funny?

--No, no, man, I don't. Please, please tell me.

He leaned down, putting his pocked face in mine, his breath fogging the lenses of my goggles.

--I forgot to laugh, that's how funny you are.

--Knock that shit off.

The guy looked at Po Sin, coming out the service exit at the back of the hotel, pushing a hand truck stacked with rotting cardboard boxes.

--Uncle, who the fuck is this?

Po Sin pointed.

--Let go his finger, Dingbang.

He let go of my finger and turned.

--Man, Uncle, don't call me that. Told you my handle's Bang. Just Bang.

Po Sin lifted the mask from his face, flicking a couple roaches from the exposed skin.

--OK, Just Bang.

--No. Just. Bang. Not Just Bang. Man.

Po Sin looked at me.

--Just Bang Man. It's like he's asking for trouble.

I laughed.

Bang turned.

--What you laughing at, shitbag? Lying in a pile of shit. What's so fucking funny about that?

Po Sin came over and offered his hand to me, looking at Bang.

--Go home, Nephew.

--What the fuck, man. I'm here. I'm ready to work.

Po Sin gave my arm a tug and it almost came clear of its socket as he hauled me up.

--Job started three hours ago.

--Told you I was gonna be late.

--No you didn't.

--I did. I called Aunt Lei and she said she'd tell you.

--No you didn't. And don't bring your aunt into it.

Po Sin pointed at the bags scattered at our feet and looked at me.

--Get these in the bin and change into a Tyvek with no shit on it, Web.

Bang pointed at me.

--Who the fuck is he?

Po Sin put a hand on his shoulder and turned him toward the end of the alley.

--He's the guy who got here on time this morning.

Bang stood his ground.

--Bullshit, man. That's bullshit. This is my job.

Po Sin leaned slightly, putting his weight behind his hand, and moved Bang off his ground and down the alley.

--That was your job, until you didn't spend last night at the shop like you were supposed to. That was your job until the van got plastered with paint because no one was there keeping an eye on things.

--I was in court yesterday. I told you. I had a violation. Fucking cop pulled me over because I'm Asian. Total profiling.

--He give you a DUI because you're Asian?

--Fuck does that matter? That's not the point. He had no reason to pull me over in the first place. I was driving fine. He wasn't profiling for Asians, he never would have known I had an open container. And that's not the fucking point anyway. I had court. I told you I had court.

Po Sin propelled him farther down the alley.

--You didn't tell me.

--I did! I did! I called! And after court I had to go explain it to my mom and she got upset and didn't want me to drive because she didn't understand that it was OK, that I hadn't been suspended and I called to tell you I couldn't be at the shop, man.

--No you didn't.

Bang dug in his heels and shrugged off his uncle's hand.

--Fuck your hand off me anyway. I do all the shit work! All of it! You, that fucking round-eye Gabe, you never pull your weight. Not that anyone could pull your weight.

--Nephew.

--No, fuck you! Fuck you and this shit job. I fucking quit! See how long that scrawny fucker lasts doing the heavy

lifting for you. See how long he lasts when there's trouble. Fuck you and fuck your fucking wife who can't take a fucking phone message and.

Whoever else was meant to be fucked had their name deleted by Po Sin's hand wrapping around his nephew's throat and shoving him into the graffitied brick wall of the hotel.

Po Sin held him there. Bang turned red.

I took a couple steps.

--Po Sin.

He looked at me. Looked at his nephew. And let go.

Bang slumped, gagged and wheezed. Po Sin put a hand on his chest.

--Dingbang? I. Dingbang.

Bang knocked the hand away.

--Don't call me that!

He pushed from the wall and ran to the end of the alley.

--Gonna pay for touching me, man! No one touches Bang!

He took a step, stopped, and pointed at me.

--You too, shitbag, you're dead!

And he rounded the corner of the alley and was gone.

Po Sin stood there for a second, turned and walked toward me.

--Sorry. He's my nephew. But. He.

--He's a dick, Po Sin.

He pulled the end of his moustache.

--Well. Yes. Like father like son. Nothing like working with family to bring out the best in a man.

--Or to make him want to strangle them.

He smiled.

--Don't know about you, but some of my family, I don't need to be anywhere near them to want to strangle 'em.

--I find it helps that my mom lives out of state.

--Never had a problem with my mother. My dad I could have throttled a couple times.

--My dad spends all his time in a bar out in Santa Monica. That far west, may as well be another state. He's safe from me.

--Yeah, distance makes the heart grow fonder.

--I didn't say that.

He started for the service entrance.

--My mother and father are both permanently out of reach. And my brother. Well. We're out of touch. Last thing I need at this point is less family.

He stopped and stared at the end of the alley where Bang had disappeared.

I bent and picked up a shitbag and tossed it in the bin.

--He was asking for it, Po Sin.

He kept looking down the alley.

--He's a boy I'm a man.

He turned his head to me.

--A man should be able to retain his composure.

I looked at the shit at my feet.

He made for the entrance.

--It's about lunch. Finish up with that and we'll go grab a bite.

--Where?

He waved a hand over his shoulder.

--Doesn't matter. With a job like this, wherever we eat it's gonna taste like shit.

I watched him go inside. I massaged my finger and rotated my wrist and swung my arm around, making sure it all worked. Then I started. Putting more shit in the bin.

He was right about lunch.

What with the smell of well-marinated crap in our hair and on our clothes and up our noses and down our throats, lunch didn't have much appeal for me. Not so, for the more experienced hands. I watched Po Sin tear into his third cheeseburger, and Gabe scrape the last of his chili from the bottom of the bowl.

Po Sin washed down a bite of burger with chocolate milkshake.

--Different things bother different people.

I picked up one of my fries and took a bite of it. It still tasted like shit.

--So you're saying I shouldn't be disturbed by the fact that having my nasal passages smelling like dung ruins my appetite? What relief. I was worried it was me, I was worried I might be some kind of deviant not wanting to eat when all I can smell is ass butter. What a load off, knowing that I'm not alone and everyone has their own problems.

Po Sin wiped his mouth.

--Thought that'd make you feel better.

I dropped the fry and pushed the unfinished bulk of my meal to the middle of the table.

--So what bothers you?

Po Sin grabbed some of my fries and shoved them in his mouth.

--Me? Nothing.

Gabe rubbed his nose.

--Nothing but kids.

Po Sin looked at me.

--Kids are hard. No one likes kids.

I looked away from Po Sin, watched some teenagers at the Fatburger counter shove each other around, laughing, and chose to ignore whatever the fuck point he was trying to make.

--I like kids. Kids are OK.

Gabe drained the last of his ice tea.

--Dead kids. No one likes dead kids.

Po Sin threw me another look, I refused to catch it, and he ate another fry.

--On a trauma job. When it's a kid. That's rough.

Gabe leaned back, the table warped in the lenses of the sunglasses he hadn't taken off since coming out of the hotel.

--Doesn't really count anyway. Kids bother everyone. None of the other stuff bothers you.

Po Sin shrugged.

--Do the job long enough, you see it all.

He dipped his head at Gabe.

--Gabe can't stand the smell of mold.

--Mildew.

--Right, mildew. Water damage. Doesn't like it.

I looked at Gabe.

--Mildew?

He didn't look at me.

--Yeah.

--Rancid mounds of feces are cool, but mildew freaks you out.

He scratched a scar that ran down the top of his left forearm.

--I don't like it much. That's all.

Po Sin's phone rang. He looked at it and answered.

--Clean Team. Uh-huh.

He felt his back pocket, found a notepad, and reached behind his ear for his stub of pencil.

--Sorry to hear that. Uh-huh. I'm sorry. Yes. Yes we do. Uh-huh. Well, we're on a job right now, but we could be there tonight. Or tomorrow morning. Uh-huh. I'm sorry to hear that. Yes it is. Yes it is. I'll. Yes. Well, I'd like to ask a few questions if I may. Well, it gives us an idea of what's involved. How many of us might be needed and such. Uh-huh. Well, most important is, have the police and the coroner released the scene? Good. OK. And can you tell me what room it happened in?

I watched him write bedroom on the notepad.

--Sure. And if I may, can I ask how? Right. I know.

Gunshot.

--And if I may, the type of weapon?

Handgun.

--Do you happen to know the caliber of the weapon?

9mm.

--I know. I know.

He took the phone from his ear and rolled his neck around. I could hear crying, cut off as he put it back at his ear.

--Can you tell me if any doors or windows were open? Can you tell me how many?

2 doors.

--Uh-huh. No. Well, it's pretty much impossible to give an estimate on the phone. Sure. What we'll do is, we'll come out, tonight or in the morning, whichever you prefer, and we'll take a look and we'll do an assessment and we'll tell you just how much time it will take and how much it will cost. No, free of charge, we do that free of charge.

He talked a little more, wrote down an address in Malibu and a phone number, and hung up and dropped the phone in his pocket. He picked up the last of his cheeseburger and put it in his mouth.

--Nine millimeter in the mouth. Gonna be an earner, that one.

Gabe nodded.

--The bigger the gun, the bigger the mess.

I knew that already. That bit of wisdom about guns and the messes that they make.

TILL HIS NEIGHBORS SMELLED HIM

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

After lunch we brought the last of the boxes down to the bin, followed by the few pieces of spavined furniture. With the floor cleared throughout, the one-bedroom apartment didn't look half big enough to have contained all that we had hauled out of it, and the stench seemed worse than ever.

I pointed at a stain on the carpet that seemed to be the epicenter of stink.

--What the fuck is that?

Po Sin came over, holding the mask to his face.

--That's where the decomp was.

--Huh?

--The guy who lived here, that's where he died and rotted till one of his neighbors smelled him.

I stared at the stain.

--What's the? Why's there a stain?

--Fluids, Web. A body dies, sits in a hot room in L.A. in July, you get a lot of fluids coming off it.

I stared, and the stain's Rorschach shape arranged itself into sprawled limbs and a bloated trunk.

--What's that black stuff?

Po Sin took a collapsible pointer from the pocket of his Tyvek, snapped his wrist and it shot open and he put it to use.

--Blood here. All this. A body decomposes, it starts to swell up, fills with gases. Eventually, it's gonna pop. Blood comes out of that, it's like dirty motor oil. Same color and consistency. This yellow, that's where the fat has started separating, that's tallow.

I squatted to look at something and the reek slapped me in the face. I turned my head and stood and took a couple steps back.

--Jesus.

--Yeah, he was ripe.

I pointed at the little lines wiggling off the stain; traceries, like veins under the skin.

--What are those?

--Maggot trails. They hatch in the corpse then go looking for a better life. All those little black things are the dry maggot shells.

He slapped his palm over the end of the pointer, collapsing it, dropped it in his pocket, and pulled out a carpet knife.

--Let's get this shit up off the floor.

We began cutting, peeling away flat industrial weave

patterned in precise geometries of grime that outlined where boxes had once been stacked. And on the wood floor, just under the stain left by the decomp, a larger stain. More abstract. And in need of scrubbing.

So I scrubbed.

The apartment stripped and bare, cockroaches fleeing through every crack, seeking refuge in the neighboring apartments, Gabe brought up an ozone generator and plugged it in.

Po Sin took off his mask and wiped his forehead and pointed at the machine.

--It'll bond oxygen to oxygen. Essentially purify the air. Eliminate the odor, not just mask it.

I was looking at the stain on the floor. Fainter now, but there was no way to get rid of the entire smear of the man's death.

Po Sin followed Gabe to the door, leaving the ozone generator behind to do its job. He stopped and looked at me.

--You OK?

I scuffed at the stain with the toe of my paper-covered boot.

--Sure.

--Never seen that one in a horror movie before, huh?

I stood there for another moment before following them out.

I hadn't. I hadn't seen that kind of thing before.

Not exactly.

--He does accommodations at night.

My head was out the window of the moving van, blowing some of the stink out of my hair. I pulled back inside to hear better.

--Accommodates what?

--Bodies. For the coroner. He picks them up. It's what they call it. Accommodations.

--No shit?

--Sure. Some wino goes stiff on Skid Row, who ya gonna call? His buddies gonna take up a collection, get him a nice casket, a mausoleum at Hollywood Forever? Damon Runyon don't live here no more, man. Once they grab his last can of Sterno and his shoes, if he's got any, they walk away. Sooner or later, someone at the mission or one of the treatment centers, or a cop cruising by because he took the wrong fucking turn, will see the body. Sometime after that, the coroner gets a call. They have a service they call to do the pickup. Gabe works for one of those services. It's his night job.

He took a bite out of a Slim Jim he got from the box beneath the driver's seat.

--That's why he can't drive you home.

--So what's up with him? Know he keeps a sap in his glove box? And what's with all that camping gear?

--Gabe's between places of residence just now.

--What, he's homeless?

--He prefers to have no fixed address at this time.

--Uh-huh.

I tapped my cheekbone.

--And that tattoo, that tear under his eye, that's gang shit, right? He some reformed O.G. or something?

He shoved that last six inches of the Slim Jim in his mouth.

--Don't talk shit you don't know shit about, Web. 'Sides, you got a problem with him if he has a history? You don't want to ride with him? You'd rather ride the bus?

We rolled on Beverly, the street bending east at the ramps to the 101.

--I don't ride the bus.

He crumpled the empty wrapper and threw it under his seat.

--I know.

Traffic crawled to a full stop for no visible reason. It being in the nature of all L.A. drivers to be suddenly seized en masse by retardation and start hitting the brake pedal when every light in the immediate vicinity is a nice bright green.

Po Sin, taking advantage of the respite, removed his hands from the wheel, stretched, looked at me.

--But you should, you know, ride the bus. Might be good for you.

I stared up at the giant red sign for the Ambassador Dog & Cat Hospital. A beacon for wounded animals everywhere. Or something. I mean, there has to be a reason why the sign is so fucking tall, right? I always picture some old lady out walking her Maltese when a sharp pain starts radiating down its left front leg. She crouches next to the stricken dog, screaming for help, cars passing by, no other pedestrians in sight. Desperate, she looks to heaven, and there it is, visible from a mile away, the Ambassador. Thank Jesus for that fucking sign!

--You listening?

I looked at him.

--Yeah. I'm just failing to hear anything that has anything to do with anything I give a shit about.

Traffic moved. Po Sin drove.

--You give a shit alright.

--Says you.

He adjusted the rearview.

--Xing's back on the bus.

--How proud you must be of her.

He grunted, a phlegmy and no doubt Slim Jim flavored sound that was meant, I suppose, to indicate his disgust.

We passed Jollibee. I stared at the red and yellow fiberglass Jolly Bee out front.

--What's with the paint on the van?

Po Sin flicked on the headlights.

--Nothing. Just business.

--Just business? Paint bombs?

--There's some competition out there. Trauma scene and waste cleaning is a growth industry.

--Competition for cleaning shit. I'm trying to make that work in my head. What kind of people are drawn to that kind of work and fight for the honor?

He reached over and punched me lightly in the shoulder. Lightly for Po Sin being sufficient to slam me into the door and leave me rubbing both shoulders.

He jabbed me with his forefinger, each jab deepening the shade of purple that would no doubt be spreading across my shoulder in the next hour, if it survived his onslaught.

--Kind of people who are fighting over cleaning shit and blood and assorted bodily fluids are people who need a job. People who need money.

Now I don't know about you, but I know a few people who fit that profile. You know anyone like that? Ring any bells?

I pulled out of his range.

--Yeah, yeah, I get it. Sure, I'm no better than anyone else. I'm just saying, seems weird to be fighting over who gets to pick up the shit.

He took a right on Highland.

--There's money to be made, people will fight. And seeing as this is a nasty area of commerce to be involved in, it sometimes attracts a pile of assholes.

--Like your nephew.

He took advantage of another halt in the traffic to stare at me.

--Web, you know the one about the pot and the kettle and what one called the other and what that story is supposed to mean?

--It's not a story, it's more of a saying. And yeah, I know

that one. And what it means. Need an explanation?

--No. My point is, shut the fuck up.

In front of my building he counted twenties from his wallet.

--Eighty bucks sound right?

I looked at the driveway, Chev's '58 Apache parked in front of my parts receptacle/car in our stacked parking slots under the building's overhanging upper story.

--Sure, sounds fine.

He held out the money and I took it and put it in my pocket.

He folded his wallet.

--Not gonna count it?

I pulled open the door.

--No.

--What if I'm ripping you off?

--You're not.

--How do you know?

I stepped out of the van.

--Well, if you are, it's only money, man. How upset am I supposed to get?

He stuffed the wallet deep in one of his front pockets.

--I spent the day hauling crap, I'd be pretty pissed if someone tried to rip me off.

I closed the door and leaned my forearms in the open window.

--Yeah, but you're a money-grubbing pig.

--You want to do some more work for the money-grubbing pig sometime?

Tomorrow maybe?

I looked at the rack of silver mailboxes riveted to the beige stucco wall at the base of the stairs.

--Well, not really. But I got to buy Chev a new phone.

He put the van in gear.

--One of us will pick you up at seven.

He started to pull out. I walked alongside as he backed into the street.

--Yeah, but I was kind of thinking I might get a check

today. And if I do. You know.

He stopped the car.

--Web, your mom sent you some money and you don't feel like working, that's fine. She didn't, and you want to work, call me in the next couple hours. I haven't found anyone else by then, you can work. Good night.

And he drove away.

I watched the van to the corner. Pulled the money from my pocket and counted it. Eighty bucks even, folded around a Clean Team business card. I let down the tailgate of the Apache and sat on it and dangled my legs, riffling the edge of the card along my knuckles, thinking about things.

A truck drove slow down the middle of the narrow street, a windowless Dodge Ram van, freshly sanded and primered across the hood and down one side. It paused while some kids rode by on their bikes in the opposite direction, and then eased down the street while I watched the kids pedal to the corner and whip into the alley. I could hear the homeless couple screaming at each other down there, calling each other names.

--Whore.

--Asshole.

--Bitch.

--Fuckface.

--Cocktease.

--Cocksucker.

--Cunt.

--Shithead.

The glorious spoken-word street poetry of Hollywood.

I listened to them and looked at the Clean Team card and tried to remember the first time I met Po Sin. I could remember the first time I'd seen him. Dropping off his youngest, Xing, walking across the chain-link-enclosed playground, the kids stopping in their tracks to watch a leviathan amongst them, holding the hand of his round-faced daughter, her Sponge Bob backpack dangling from his free hand. He'd made an impression.

But the first time I'd met him? School play maybe. Po Sin leaning against the back of the auditorium because the little folding chairs were too small. Me standing back there keeping an eye on the rowdy kids who like to sit as far from the front of a room as possible.

I'd been one of those kids at the back. Spitballs. Whispering. Elbow digs. Giggles. Passed notes about boogers. But mostly sneaking a book out of my back pocket to hide in my lap and read, tuning out whatever was happening up on the stage at the front of the hall.

Pretty much the same shit going on with the kids I was eyeballing. Except there was a greater chance that the notes being passed around would include the word fuck, and that anyone looking at something in their lap was going to be

playing a Gameboy or PSP, not reading a book.

Po Sin had smiled when Xing, an infamous back-stabbing two-faced queen-bee, universally hated by all the second-grade girls and the entire female faculty, came on stage as a fairy or a tree or a rainbow or something, and applauded after she got out her line.

I'd leaned close and told him how cute she was, and he'd looked at me and shook his head.

--She's a terror, an absolute bitch. But yeah, she's cute as hell.

We talked a little during the cookies and punch segment of the evening. He'd told me his business. I'd mentioned that my roommate needed someone to dispose of his biowaste.

He and Chev hit it off, and Chev would come home and give reports about what Po Sin was cleaning while I corrected papers. Tales of hand-scrubbing each piece of ballast along two hundred yards of rail bed after a train strike on a junkie, delivered as I put small red marks in the margins of phonics tests and What I Did for Kwanzaa essays.

He looked me up after I quit. To say what, I don't know. I didn't answer the phone or listen to the message he left. Something about Xing, I imagine.

Later, when he'd come by the shop to pick up Chev's waste, and see me hanging, he'd say some nice things. At first. Then he started making some suggestions about how I might want to, I don't know, get some help or some other kind of daytime talk show bullshit. When that weed didn't take root in me, he stopped talking about it. For a long time. Then he got used to the idea of me being a dick and started treating

me like normal and telling me I was acting like an asshole fuckup, which was a whole hell of a lot easier on both of us.

And now I was working for him. Acquiring new job skills. The mystic arts of erasing all signs of death. These things, these things you do to get by when need arises, they sometimes equip you for the rest of your life. However long that turns out to be.

There was a rattle overhead. I looked up and watched a small flock of sparrows as they hopped and scratched across the fronds of a palm tree growing from the neighbor's dense yard, pecking at some kind of tidbit that had come to rest up there. A crow flapped down from the power line, scattering most of them, cawing, its action drawing the attention of several members of the murder that made the street home. I leaned over and picked up a rock and pitched it into the tree and watched the crows wing off to look for easier fodder in the alley dumpsters down the street. The sparrows came back.

I got up and closed the tailgate and went upstairs, dragging my hand over the stucco wall of the complex as I walked down the second-floor exterior walkway, listening to stereos and TV shows and arguments and yip-ping dogs behind the doors of our neighbors. I unlocked the front door and walked in and looked at the girl whose nipple I'd stretched the day before at the shop, sitting on the couch in her panties and Chev's favorite Misfits T, with one of my books open in her lap.

She looked up.

--Oh, it's the dick.

Chev walked in, pulling on his boxers, tattoos scattered

over his body thickest at the ends of his limbs, thinning as they approached his torso.

He hoisted a tallboy of Miller at me.

--Hey it's the breadwinner.

He dropped on the couch next to the girl.

--This is Dot.

Dot made room for him next to her.

--Yeah, I already said hi.

She held up the big purple and gold book she'd been flipping through.

--So did you really teach over at Hollywoodland Elementary? These kids are so cute.

I walked over and took the book from her and closed it and went to the shelf and found its space with the other yearbooks and slipped it in where it belonged and turned and stared at Chev.

He rubbed his shoulder.

--Sorry, man, I didn't know she was looking at that.

Dot looked at him, at me.

--What? I like kids. What?

Chev got up and walked toward the kitchen.

--Hey good news, working man, you got a FedEx package from Oregon. And it's not berries.

He grabbed a FedEx envelope from the table and scaled it to me. I caught it and headed for my room.

Dot smiled.

--Sorry about looking at your book. I just finished my first year at UCLA in the education department. I was curious. I didn't know you were a teacher.

Chev opened the fridge.

--Told you she was eighteen.

She made a face as I walked past her.

--Oh. My. God. What the fuck is that smell?

I took a long shower. A very long shower. And then I took another one. Longer this time. And then I splashed myself with some of Chev's Old Spice. And a little more. Then I went in my room and turned on my fan and opened my window and tried not to breathe through my nose and prayed that the stink wouldn't get into my bedding and the carpet. And after about a half hour I finally grew something resembling a brain and gathered my dirty clothes and bagged them and took them down to the laundry room, ignoring the various squeals and grunts coming from Chev's room as I passed his door.

Back in my room I opened the FedEx envelope and shook

out the bills and an assortment of change.

$567.89. And, true to form, no note. Not that I'd asked for one.

Under certain circumstances, the odd amount would mean Mom had sent whatever was lying around, but that wasn't the case here.

Five hundred.

Sixty.

And seven dollars.

Eighty.

And nine cents.

Five six seven eight nine, an ascending numerical sequence. Sent specifically to bring me luck, to raise my spirits, to lift my fortunes.

I'm lucky there wasn't a crystal pyramid in the envelope.

Five hundred sixty-seven and eighty-nine cents. Enough to cover the new phone, buy some groceries and pay off some of the IOUs on the fridge.

I thought about what I'd do the next day. Sleep in. Have some coffee. Pick up around the place, clean the tub. Go do some grocery shopping. Maybe hit the bookstore for a few novels. Get the latest issue of Femmes Fatale. Stop by the shop. Have lunch. Buy a couple DVDs. Come home and have

some dinner. Watch a movie. And in bed by seven. Just like pretty much every day this last year. Any day when I had money, that is.

I thought about it. How nice and mellow it would be. A day to myself after having to be around people and be at Po Sin's beck and call and hear all his shit.

Yeah, a me day as a reward for all that hard work.

I picked up the handset from the phone I'd brought into the bedroom.

--Clean Team.

--Hey it's Web.

--Yeah?

--You find anyone for tomorrow?

--Why?

--Nothing.

--Didn't get any money from mommy today?

--No.

--Well, you want to work, all you got to do is say so.

--I want to work.

PIPE BOMB IN THE ASS

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

There was a lot of blood at the Malibu beach house. And it was everywhere. Really everywhere.

Gabe studied the thick maroon blotch at the center of a lighter red eruption splashed over the wall and headboard, all of it studded with gray and yellow and pink gobbets of dangling matter.

He fingered a strip of yellow tape, marked like a yardstick, that ran up the edge of the wall. Near the top it intersected with another piece that ran horizontally just over the highest point of the mess. He looked at that point.

--That wasn't a nine.

The deputy coughed in the doorway.

--Yeah, what we thought. But it was. He did it with a mouth full of water.

Gabe looked again at the dry blood.

--That would do it.

I thought about high school science classes. How shock waves travel through water. I thought about what would happen if you filled a soda can with water and stuck the barrel of a gun in the hole and pulled the trigger. And then the deputy filled in the gaps in my imagination. --The water shredded his cheeks. Crushed his nasal passages and ripped

his nose off. Some of it was forced down his throat and it turned his tongue inside out and punched a hole in the bottom of his stomach. Goes without saying it took the whole back of his head off. Everything behind the ears.

He rapped his knuckle on the wall opposite the bed.

--Created so much pressure in his sinuses, his eyes popped out. We found one of them over here.

I looked through the open door that led to the master bath. Blood spackled the white tile and porcelain and bath towels. My reflection in the mirror over the twin sinks was glazed with dried streaks of red. Beyond, through a door at the far end of the bathroom, and let me just say that it was a really big fucking bathroom, I could see more blood spattering the carpet, chair and desk in what looked to be a small den. Small by the standards of this house, that is.

But those rooms were nothing compared with the bedroom. The bedroom looked painted in blood, but not well painted, mind you. Painted, in point of fact, by a collection of one-armed troglodytes employing bundles of reeds rather than brushes and rollers. Painted in dripping and splotchy reds, maroons and purples punctuated by bits and clots of gray and white and black, and the occasional twisted knot of tendon.

--This is unfuckingbelievable.

Gabe and the deputy looked at me.

I held out my arms, bugging my eyes.

--What? Am I wrong? I mean, this is unfuckingreal. This

is. Water in the mouth? Water in the mouth gets you this? Myfuckinggod.

The deputy looked at Gabe.

--Where'd you find him?

Gabe picked at something imbedded in the wall, his fingernails rimmed with dry yellow paint.

--Po Sin knows him.

--You tell him about the pipe bomb?

Gabe took a Leatherman from the nylon case on his belt and unfolded it into pliers.

--Be my guest.

The deputy put his hands on his hips.

--Guy was ex-military

He looked at Gabe.

--Right?

Gabe closed the tips of the pliers over whatever was in the wall.

--I think so, yeah.

The deputy looked back at me.

--OK, ex-military guy wanted to off himself. So he made a pipe bomb.

I put my hand to my forehead.

--No.

--Yeah. And to do it, what he did was, he sat on it. And I don't mean sat on it, I mean he sat on it. Full insertion.

I put my other hand on my forehead.

--Oh no.

He nodded.

--Yeah. Pipe bomb in the ass. And, here we go, he does this while seated on his water bed.

--Oh shit.

--You'd think. But here's what happened. The, what, the internal dynamics of a bomb in the rectal passage were such that the force of the explosion went straight up. Not only did the bed not burst, but by giving slightly while still offering resistance, it helped to focus the blast upward. Thing went off, it scoured his viscera, guts, lungs, everything, shot them up through his head and out the top of his skull. Like a fountain. The whole room got sprayed, but other than looking a little bloated, and, you know, his head being gone from the eyebrows up, he was intact. And the bed was peachy.

He made pistol fingers and pointed at me.

--That was a fucking mess.

Gabe twisted the pliers and pulled something free of the wall and inspected it.

--Yeah. It was a big job.

He dropped the object in his palm and walked to the deputy, folding the Leatherman away.

--You need this for anything?

I walked over and looked at the large silver-filled molar he was showing the deputy.

The deputy shook his head.

--No. We finished in here. No way to fake a scene like this. Don't need teeth in the wall to tell us what happened. He made it easy. Note. All that.

I walked to the door and looked down the hall. I could see Po Sin on the couch next to the girl who'd let us in. The two of them going over papers on a clipboard, the girl signing her name. Po Sin taking a travel pack of Kleenex from his breast pocket and handing it to her as she set the clipboard aside and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

I looked back in the room.

--So why'd he do it?

The deputy looked at me.

--Brain tumor.

He pointed at what had been a head, now gored all over the wall.

--Guess he showed it who was boss.

In the driveway Gabe and I put on our Tyveks and I watched Po Sin palm the deputy a fifty.

--Thanks for the referral, Mercer. Hope we can do some more business over here.

Mercer pocketed the cash.

--No problem.

He opened the door of his patrol car.

--Far as I'm concerned, Aftershock's off the referral list. Last job I put them onto, a teenager did her wrists in the bathtub, right. Found out she was pregnant or something. Anyway, door closed. Hardly any splatter at all. Plastic shower curtain. Couple towels. Easy as hell. A month after they were in there, the girl's brother uses the tub for the first time, to wash the family dog, right. Has Fido in there, running the water to get it warm how his best little friend likes it. What happens is, the water starts backing up, starts filling the tub, and it's fucking red. Drain was choked with dry blood and feces from the girl. Those Aftershock rocket scientists, they poured some Drano in there and called it a day. Little boy is already traumatized from his sister having to take a real long nap, and now bloody water's gushing up

from the drain and his dog is spazzing out. Family calls Aftershock, pretty justifiably upset, and Morton tells them it's not his problem. Tells them he did his job and they signed off on the work. He'll be happy to send someone over, but he'll have to draw up a new invoice. Fucking prick. And guess who gets the next call? They have my fucking card 'cause I was first on the scene. Want to know why the people I suggested to them to clean up after their tragedy won't take care of their responsibilities? Want to know what I can do about it, right? Well, last thing I need is these people getting upset with me and putting in a call to the Civil Litigation Unit and end up with those fuckers asking me what the hell I'm doing giving referrals for private contractors. So I call fucking Morton and tell him to get his ass over there and take care of it before I call a friend in Parking Enforcement and see that his fucking van has a ticket on it every time it's on the street.

He took his hat off and tossed it inside the car.

--So fuck them and fuck the guild. From now on, you're top of the list west as well as east side. And I'll spread the word.

Po Sin gave him a thumbs-up.

--Much appreciated.

--My pleasure. I refer you guys, you get the job done. And you've never stiffed me.

He got in the car and pulled down the short drive to the PCH, waited for a hole in the traffic, and headed south.

Po Sin came over to the van, stripping off his Clean Team shirt and reaching for the Tyvek Gabe held out to him.

--To protect and to serve, Web, to protect and to serve.

I scooped brains.

I scooped them with a wide plastic paint scraper from a ninety-nine-cent store, and I wiped them onto blue industrial paper towels, I dropped the towels in red biohazard bags and dropped the bags in a fifty-gallon plastic garbage can with a Clean Team sticker on the side.

Po Sin watched.

--Spray some more up there.

I took the spray bottle from tool belt and sprayed some hydrogen peroxide, and specks of blood and brain I'd missed on the counter foamed white.

Po Sin nodded, pursed his lips.

--See, you miss stuff. No matter how close you look, there's always more.

He took a step toward the bedroom where he and Gabe were dealing with the real environmental disaster.

--And stop taking off your mask.

I blew out my cheeks.

--What, it doesn't smell or anything, there aren't any cockroaches trying to crawl in my mouth.

--No, but there's dry blood, and it will flake and go airborne and you'll inhale it.

I pointed at the fogger in the bedroom.

--I thought the Microban killed everything.

--It does. It should. But it's still considered a bad idea to breathe other people's dry blood. Trust me on that one.

--Fine, fine.

I put the mask over my mouth and went back to scraping and wiping. Cleaning the blood and brains. Throwing away the ruined terry-cloth towels and bathmat and a thick robe that had been draped over the shower rod, and the fuzzy cover on the toilet seat. Opening the cabinet doors and looking inside and spraying hydrogen peroxide, in case one of them had been open when the guy did it. Doing the same with the drawers. Checking the back of the shower curtain liner. Peeling the liner from the curtain and looking between them. Finding spots of blood in the grout between tiles and getting down on my knees and working at it with a toothbrush, trying to scrub it from the porous material. Spinning the roll of toilet paper on its spindle and finding a dry pink blot soaked through dozens of layers. Tossing the roll in with the other hazards. Finishing. Standing in the middle of the huge bathroom and turning in place, finding no sign that death came here.

And liking that feeling. Things back as they had been. Better than they had been. Like nothing had ever gone wrong.

Clean. Blank. New.

I nodded to myself.

--Never know the stupid fucker was too lame to just eat some pills or stick his head in a plastic bag or some shit like normal losers.

--Oh my God.

I looked over at the open door of the den, and found the girl who had signed the contract with Po Sin standing there.

She stared at me, both hands covering her mouth.

--Oh. Oh, my Gaaawd!

She turned, shoulders shaking, and ran.

I looked up where heaven is supposed to be kept.

--Crap.

Po Sin appeared at the other door.

--What? What the hell was that? Who was that?

I pointed at the den.

--The girl. I didn't know she was. She snuck up on me.

From the den we could hear muffled, choked sobs.

He stepped into the bathroom, pulling his mask from his

face, hissing.

--What the fuck, Web? What did you do?

--Nothing, man. I was talking to myself. I was. I didn't know she was there.

He stared at me, looked at the door the girl had stood in, tiptoed to it and peeked in the den. He looked over his shoulder and waved me over. I crept to his side and looked in the room. The girl was standing in the corner where two walls of bookcases converged, her back to us, shoulders jerking, sounds hitching in her throat.

Po Sin stuck his index finger in my chest and then pointed at the girl.

I shook my head.

He balled his hand into a fist, put it close to my face, pointed at the girl again.

I shook my head.

He leaned down, put his mouth to my ear.

--You get your ass in there and apologize for whatever asshole comment came out of your mouth right now or you will never work a day with me again.

He straightened, glaring down at me, mouthing words.

Grow the fuck up!

And he turned and walked back into the bedroom, back to helping Gabe cut away the blood-soaked portions of the mattress so they could be bagged for disposal.

I stood in the pristine bathroom. Cleaner now, no doubt, than it had been since the day the house was built. I looked at the gleam and shine on every surface. I looked at what I had done to make things look normal again. I thought about maybe being able to do that some more, make things the way they were.

And then, for some reason, I thought of the Flying Dutchman bus I saw the other morning. Thought of it ghosting the streets.

And shook it off.

I looked at the girl's heaving back and shoulders.

--Crap.

I crossed the room, pulling the mask from my face, lifting the safety glasses to my forehead.

--Urn. Excuse. Urn. I didn't mean any.

Her shoulders shook harder.

I peeled the rubber gloves from my hands and wiped sweat off my forehead.

--Look. I really. I didn't mean anything personal. I didn't know you were there. I mean, I know that doesn't make it OK for me to say shit like. To say stuff like that, but I didn't

mean anything by it, it was just. It's a little tense, doing … this. And I guess I have a fucked up … a lame sense of humor sometimes.

--Oh God. Oh gaaawd! Stop! Stop. Ho, my God, stop, you're killing me.

She turned, tears running down her face, gasping, waving a hand at me, trying to kill the laughter forcing its way up her throat.

--Oh, man, so completely inappropriate.

--I said I was sorry.

She shook out her match and dropped it off the deck to the sand below, watching it get caught in the wind and tumble into some rocks.

--No, it was just so perfect. Totally inappropriate. Exactly the kind of thing he would have said.

She pushed her glasses a little higher on her nose.

--Except he wouldn't have apologized.

I looked over my shoulder through the open sliding glass door and caught a glimpse of Gabe coming back into the house with another pack of scrapers.

I looked down at the tide as it washed over the rocks.

--Well, left to my own devices, I wouldn't have apologized either.

She choked on a lungful of smoke, more laughter combining with a few hacks.

I watched for a second then gave her a couple light pats on the back.

--You OK?

She coughed into her fist.

--Oh, sure, I'm fine.

She wiped the damp corners of her eyes with one of the Kleenexes Po Sin gave her.

--My dad killed himself in one of the more deliberate and grotesque manners imaginable and I'm laughing about it with one of the guys I'm paying to clean his brains off the wall. I'm doing great.

I turned and leaned my back on the deck rail and shrugged.

--Well, as long as you're OK then.

She smiled.

--Totally inappropriate.

--At least he left a note.

I didn't say anything, too occupied at the moment with working my Scotch-Brite pad over the speckles of blood on

the surface of her dad's desk.

She picked another almond from the large bowl of them on the table next to the wingback chair near the hallway door.

--I mean, I knew he was sick. But. But I'm glad he left the note anyway. So I know for sure why he did it. Sort of.

She dropped the almond back in the bowl, picked out another.

--You think anyone would lie about that? I mean, no one would lie on their suicide note, would they?

I replaced the lamp I'd taken from the desk, minus the silk shade that had been sprayed, and looked over at her.

--You want to be a little more enigmatic with your questions? Seriously, if you try a little harder I might get curious or something.

She studied the almond between her fingers, rotating it.

--No. I don't mean anything. He was sick. He was going to die. Soon. Painfully. I know why he did it. I just never read a suicide note before. It made me wonder. I guess. But no. It all makes sense.

I adjusted the silver pen-and-pencil set on the desk and lined it up with the antique in-and-out box and an absurdly detailed model of a freight vessel, its deck stacked with tiny cargo containers, Chinese characters on their sides.

She tossed the almond in her mouth and chewed.

--Makes sense as only a person making their head explode can make sense, I mean.

I walked to the section of bookcase that was in line with the open bathroom door.

--He had some nice books.

She watched me.

--Yeah. He loved his books. Well, he loved having a den with lots of books on the walls anyway. He never actually read them. He loved how they looked, but if it wasn't business-related or on the topic of fishing, Dad didn't have time to read much.

She dropped her voice an octave.

--Too much to do, sweetheart. Why bother reading about some made-up life when you can live it yourself?

She brushed curly dark hair from her forehead, bit her lip.

--Is that bad, that it kind of makes sense to me? What he did? Should I be worried?

I misted the spines of the books and watched white speckles appear over dozens of them.

--Fuck do I know. I just work here.

--Right, I forgot, you're the retard who doesn't know how to say the right thing.

She picked up another almond, moved it toward her mouth, stopped.

--Should I be eating these things?

I looked at the bowl of nuts, well out of line with the bathroom door.

--Urn. Truth?

--No, lie to me, that would make me feel so much better.

I wiped my cheek on my shoulder.

--I doubt they could get hit with anything over there.

She started to put the nut in her mouth.

I turned back to the bookcase.

--But then again, this is my second day on the job and I'm the same lame fucker who made fun of how your dad wasted himself. So you might not want to listen to someone so clearly retarded.

She dropped the nut back in the bowl.

--Yeah, you got a point.

She got off the chair and walked over to me and looked

at the books.

I misted them again and she reached out and touched the tip of her finger to a white spot that had appeared on a photograph on one of the shelves: a sunburned man with a thick moustache, large arms and shoulders, standing on a dock next to a striped marlin, well over 200 pounds, hanging from a tackle rig.

--Damnit. Goddamn it.

--What the fuck are you doing?

I helped Po Sin muscle the bagged and gutted mattress down the hall to the front door.

--Working.

He stopped, pausing in front of the door that led into the den, watching the girl as she took several books down from the shelves and boxed them.

--Looks to me like she's working.

He looked at me again, shook his head, and backed toward the front door and out into the sun.

We leaned the mattress against the van and I pointed back at the house.

--She wanted to go through them herself. She said she didn't want to keep the fabric-covered ones because she could see some of the marks.

Po Sin rested his ass in the open back door of the van and it dropped on its shocks.

--Fuck that. I mean, what are you doing talking with her?

I raised my hands over my head.

--You said talk to her!

--I said apologize, I didn't say engage in a damn tete-a-tete with her.

--She wanted to talk, man. What am I supposed to say? Oh, miss, so sorry, my boss is a total prick and will freak out if I have a conversation with you in your own house while you're grieving the loss of your father who just killed himself. Maybe you should take this dime and go call someone who's allowed to give a fuck.

Po Sin turned his head and looked through the ranked cedars to the clogged traffic on the PCH.

--Gonna take forever to get home.

I kicked a rock.

--Yeah.

He pushed himself up, the van bounced, free of ballast.

--Giving a fuck, Web, that's not exactly the MO you've been working under for some time now.

I watched traffic.

Po Sin watched it, too.

--And people in her situation, they are prone to acting in ways they would not under normal circumstances. Start doing shit like talking to the help about their personal tragedies. Situation like that can become quickly awkward. People can all of a sudden realize they are not acting like themselves and freak out on everyone around them. And people employed to eliminate evidence that their loved ones ever existed can make attractive targets when they lash out. And that can make the job much more difficult than it needs to be. And this is my livelihood here. My business that I built from the ground up. And I don't need to have it getting all fucked up because some shell-shocked young woman mistakes your disinterest in pretty much anything for some kind of blase charm, and ends up getting more deeply injured than she already is and has an inevitable emotional detonation and refuses to pay her fucking bill. I have enough problems, thank you.

--Don't worry, I know he's a disaffected asshole. No danger of me getting sucked into his emotional black hole or anything.

We turned from the traffic.

She stood at the top of the driveway, wind blowing her hair across her face and rippling the hem of her knee-length black jersey dress, a box of books in her arms.

--So you guys want to look and see if you want any of these?

* * *

--You sure?

--Yeah, of course. No, wait.

I stood away from the box of books I was sliding into the back of the van and she reached in and pulled one out.

--Not this one.

I looked at the title.

--You like that?

She looked at it herself.

--No, I'm keeping it because I think it sucks.

--Well that makes sense then, because it really does suck.

She bit her lip.

--My dad loved Sister Carrie.

--Oh fuck, I'm sorry, I.

She clutched the book to her heart and threw her wrist across her forehead.

--He treasured this book and called me his little Carrie. This book was a bond between us. A treasure we shared.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets.

--Yes, please fuck with me some more, I like it so much when you make me feel like an asshole. And it's such an obvious challenge to you, I can see how you can't help yourself.

She dropped her arms and smiled.

--Sorry. You're just so funny when you try to apologize. You're so bad at it. You can't hide the fact that you don't think you should have to do it.

--Again, I'm glad my being an asshole is a source of entertainment.

--It is, it is.

Gabe came out of the house, carrying the fogger and a half-empty jug of Microban. He walked between us and set them in the back of the truck.

--All done.

He looked at the box of books, the girl pointed at them.

--Help yourself if you want.

He shook his head and peeled his Tyvek off, stripping to his black slacks and white short sleeve.

--No, thank you.

He walked to his Cruiser.

--See you around, Web.

And he got in the car and rolled.

The girl looked at me.

--What's his story?

--I'm not allowed to ask.

Po Sin came from the house, the clipboard in his hand.

--Ready for the walk-through?

She looked up at the house.

--No, it's fine. I looked. It's fine.

She reached for the clipboard, but he held it away.

--We should really do a walk-through. Have you look at everything on the invoice and check it off.

She took the clipboard from him.

--No, I don't want to do that.

She signed her name and put her initials next to several ballpoint Xs on the contract.

--It's fine.

Po Sin raised his shoulders.

--Just if there's a problem, something we might have missed, and you don't see it now. You know? The home owner's insurance can get tricky.

She handed the clipboard back.

--If there's a problem, I'll pay to have it taken care of.

She looked at the house.

--Or I'll light a match and burn the place down.

Po Sin turned and slammed the rear doors of the van.

--Just so you know what's what.

She held out her hand.

--I know what's what.

He shook her hand, nodded, and started around the van.

--Come on, Web, time to hit it.

I looked at the girl, pointed at the van.

--Well, I gotta. You gonna be? In there?

She tapped me on the shoulder with her book.

--Go on, Web. Sensitivity doesn't suit you.

I scratched my head.

--Yeah. And I thought I was doing so well with it.

She smiled, turned, and wandered back toward the house, drifting from one side of the sandstone path to the other, slapping the book against her thigh as she went.

In the van, I watched her as Po Sin jockeyed for an open spot in the traffic. I watched her go to the open door of the house, stand there, then turn away and sit on the edge of the porch and open the book and flip slowly through the pages till she found one she wanted to read.

The last sight I'd have of her for some time, without bloodshed being involved anyway.

Cherchez lafemme.

THE SON OF A BITCH HE RAISED

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

Bumper to bumper down the Pacific Coast Highway. The feet of the Santa Monicas on our left dotted with custom luxury homes; losing bets placed against inevitable mud slides and quakes. The stilted houses on our right, overhanging the beach and the ocean, equally stupid money placed against the tides.

But Jesus they have great views.

I thought about the girl back at her father's beach house. Her beach house now, one could assume. I eyeballed the clipboard on the dash in front of Po Sin, and he caught me and shook his head.

--No fucking way.

--Why?

--Because that is private information that a client has shared with me for the purpose of doing business and you are not allowed to look at it.

I reached for the clipboard.

--But I am an employee of the firm and should be trusted with this information if I am to do my job in an efficient manner.

He placed a weighty fist on the clipboard.

--But you are not a trusted employee. You are a ten buck an hour fuckup day laborer who is not allowed to cherry pick the phone numbers of attractive female clients so that you can harass them and get me sued.

I leaned back in my seat and folded my arms.

--Fine. Whatever you say, jefe.

He stuck his hand under the seat and came out with a Slim Jim and unwrapped it.

I looked out at the Pacific Ocean.

--What was that about the guild?

Po Sin cocked an eyebrow.

--What?

--The guild. That deputy you bribed mentioned a guild and something about aftershocks or something?

--Don't worry about it. It's not your problem.

I threw my hands up.

--Shit, man, I know it's not my problem, I'm just curious. I'm just trying to make conversation. I'm not allowed to ask about the damn girl back there. Fine. You don't want to talk about the business. Fine. So let's talk about the diet you're supposed to be on and how that's going. How are your cholesterol numbers looking? Triglycerides? How's the blood pressure? Your wife know you're munching sticks of pig ass seasoned with MSG?

He bit a hunk off the Slim Jim, chewed it once, and swallowed.

--Soledad.

--Say what?

--Her name is Soledad. And here's a tip, it means solitude in Spanish. As in, Leave me the fuck alone.

I held my arm out the window and felt the sun burning it red.

--She didn't pick her own name.

--Drop me over here.

Po Sin looked around.

--We're only in Santa Monica. How the hell you gonna get home from here?

--I'll get a ride.

--A ride. Chev gonna drive out here to pick you up?

--I'll get a ride. Pull over, pull over here, man.

He pulled the van to the curb on Ocean, just past the pier.

--Tell you one thing, you get stuck out here, I won't be coming to get you.

I opened the door and started to get out and he grabbed the tail of my old Mobil gas station shirt.

--Web.

I looked at him.

--You get stuck out here, you're gonna be riding the bus.

I tugged free.

--I can get a ride.

He held up his hands.

--As you wish.

I climbed out and pushed the door closed.

--That's the idea.

He pushed a button on his armrest and the passenger window slid down.

--Listen, there's no job tomorrow. You want to make some more cash, you can help clean the shop.

I shrugged.

--Sure. Sure. Sounds good.

--OK.

The window rolled back up and he drove off toward the 10 West.

I stood there for a minute and looked at the causeway to the pier and thought about walking out past the bars and the fried-food stands and the Ferris wheel all the way to the end so I could stand there and stare at the water. But instead I turned around and trotted across the street and walked into the late-afternoon darkness inside Chez Jay.

Dark, the only light coming in through the open upper half of the split front door and three portholes cut behind the bar. Fishing nets, life preservers and a ship's anchor on the walls, a tattered American flag hung in a single billow over

the bar. I took a seat on the corner. The bartender looked down from the TV where he was watching a rerun of Charlie's Angels.

He came over.

--I was always a Kate Jackson man. You?

I glanced at the TV.

--Never watched it.

He stops in his tracks.

--Naw?

--Didn't have a TV growing up.

--No kidding. One of those.

--Yeah. One of those. No early childhood brain cancer to retard my emotional development.

--That's not funny.

--Not supposed to be.

He looked back up at the TV.

--Well I like the show.

--Yeah, I rest my case.

--Huh?

--Can I have a beer, please?

--What kind?

--Whatever.

He took a mug from behind the bar and drew a Heineken and set it in front of me.

--Four.

--I got that.

I looked at the old man tucked into the angle where the bar met the wall. Hunched over an open book, a stack of several more books at his elbow, thick plastic-rimmed glasses on the end of his swollen nose, a sweating glass of beer in front of him paired with a half-full shot glass.

He nudged a few dollars out of the pile of bills next to his drinks.

--That bother you, that no-TV thing?

I lifted my glass and took a sip.

--No. Not really. I read a lot.

The bartender took the money and went back down the bar.

--Well I like TV.

The old man gestured at his back.

--And here he is, tending bar.

I shrugged.

--It's a job.

The old man scraped his fingernails over his whiskers.

--It's a shitty job.

The bartender turned up the volume on the TV.

The old man dog-eared the corner of the page he was reading and closed the book.

--You still read a lot?

--Yeah.

He started going through the stack. He found what he was looking for and pulled it from the pile and offered it to me.

--Ever read this one?

I took the book and looked at the cover.

A Fan's Notes.

--Yeah, I read it.

He took the book back.

--That's a good book.

I took a sip of beer.

--It's good, I like it, but it's not that great.

He put the book on top of the stack.

--Did I say it was great? I said it was good. Try listening.

--Whatever.

He pulled at the collar of his red flannel shirt, the skin beneath beach-bum rough and brick red.

--A great book is a rare thing. What have you read lately that's great?

--Nothing.

--See what I mean.

He held up the book he was reading when I came in.

--Anna Karenina. A great book. Indisputably.

--Indisputably great trashy fiction.

He set the book down.

--Are you trying to upset me?

--No. I just think it's a great piece of popular melodrama, but not a great piece of art.

He turned on his stool, faced me.

--Who the hell? Where do you get off? This is one of the.

He backhanded the air.

--Why do I bother? You might as well have spent your childhood watching TV. Should have just wheeled one into your bedroom and plugged it into your eyes and let it brainwash you like the rest of society. You could be a bartender instead of a teacher. You could have a nice comfortable job pouring drinks and mopping vomit and watching TV. Wasted time. Wasted effort.

He picked up his shot glass and drained it.

--Wasted life.

I stared at the beer in my glass.

He knocked the base of the shot glass on the bar and the bartender came down with a bottle of Bushmills in his hand.

He topped off the old man's shot glass.

--L.L., how 'bout you take it easy on my customers. You buy the guy a drink, doesn't mean you have the right to browbeat him.

I raised a hand.

--It's cool, he's my dad.

L.L. wrote a novel.

It's on that shelf with the Nelson Algren and Bukowski and Kerouac at your local independent bookstore. If you have one of those. If not, you can find it on the Internet. But it will probably be the printing they did for the movie.

He wrote his novel before he met my mom. Really, he met my mom because he wrote the novel. It was a cult thing. Dozens of printings over the years, each of them a run of a couple thousand, well regarded enough to get him several guest lecture gigs in the late sixties as a not quite elder statesman of the counterculture. If not for that, he'd never have been at UC Berkeley in '68. Never gone to the Fillmore with some of his grad students to see a happening, and loudly denigrate it as bullshit, sounding off at the back of the hall, a bottle of mescal in one hand and a huge joint in the other, surrounded by the more reactionary wing of the peace and freedom movement. If not for that, he'd never been challenged by an attractive young undergrad from SF State, who proposed to show him how rock music, acid and free love could change the world. Never would have eye-droppered a dose of U.S. government pure LSD and ended up fucking the undergrade brains out in Golden Gate Park at dawn, receiving along the way what he once described to me as, The most sublime head known to man or Jesus. I saw the universe entire in that blow job, Web, the whole damn shooting match. Never would have taken the undergrad to wife that week. Never would have brought her back to Los Angeles with him. And certainly never would have gotten stone fucked up with her twelve years later, on one of the rare occasions they had sex anymore, and forgotten to make sure she had in her diaphragm and impregnated her with a child she would refuse to abort, all of it ending with me as his son.

Or that's how he tells the story.

The old man rubbed a hand over his round belly.

--Would you have preferred that? If I'd just plopped you in front of the boob tube for your education? It could have prepared you for a menial life, it would have been no trouble at all. It would have been much easier than teaching you how to read when you were two. It would have been much easier than showing you the constellations or taking you to the Getty to see Rembrandts or the Hollywood Bowl to see Bernstein. It would have been much easier than giving you an education that you were able to use, something to share with your students. There's no nobler profession, no better use of a life than to teach, but I could have saved us both the trouble and given you a TV and that would have made you happy, it seems.

I looked at the old man.

--I'm not teaching anymore.

He blinked.

--Oh, and what kind of job have you turned your energies to?

--I'm. Cleaning stuff.

He picked at the tuft of gray hair sprouting from his right ear.

--A janitor.

--No.

--You're cleaning for a living?

--Well, for the last couple days.

--Then you are, my son, either a janitor or a housekeeper. Are you a housekeeper?

--No.

He swiveled on his stool and signaled the bartender.

--Do you have, by any chance, an application? My son, I think, might be looking to improve his employment situation.

The bartender blinked.

--We're not hiring.

My dad shrugged.

--Alas. Another beer then. He can use it to drown his useless dreams and sorrows.

I drained my glass and set it down.

--Thanks, Dad. But I think you're mistaking me for you.

He grinned, showing me the gap where his two upper front teeth used to be before he lost them in an Ensenada bar fight.

--Ah, now there's the little son of a bitch I raised.

Lincoln Lake Crows loves teachers and teaching. In theory. Which is to say, he loves the idea of teachers and of

teaching.

The Noblest Profession, Web. No greater calling than the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next. A thankless task it is, to the outsider. The teacher, the true teacher, knows that the rewards of his calling are not properly measured in silver. They are measured in the achievements of the teacher's students. Respect, yes. Admiration, yes. A word of thanks, yes. All these are well deserved and appreciated. But the true and absolute payment comes in seeing a student learn ana apply that learning. No matter how modest their accomplishments may be, that is the reward. That is coin of the realm for a true teacher.

And he should know. Old L.L. put his years in as a high school teacher. Toiling in the mines of public education for well over a decade.

He'd still be there now.

Except that he wrote a novel. And he lived in Los Angeles. And someone he knew knew someone who knew someone who passed the novel around to someone. And that someone turned out to be Dennis Hopper. And he showed it to Bob Rafelson. And Bob, as he was known around our house, took out an option.

And L.L.'s opinions about remuneration changed very rapidly thereafter.

At least that's how my mom tells the story.

--And what brings the fruit of my loins to the western precipice of this, our waning civilization?

I forked up the last of the sand dabs he'd ordered for me and wiped my mouth.

--Nothing.

I put the fork down and pushed the plate away. Dad hadn't bothered to eat, food inhibiting, as it does, the absorption of alcohol.

He flicked his eyes across a page of the book he had reopened while I ate.

--Nothing. Certainly. Why should a janitor be anything but aimless? The freedoms of the laboring class. Why fill the off hours with knowledge and investigation, with self-improvement? To what end, after all? Nothing. Indeed.

I leaned over on my stool and took a toothpick from the dispenser on the shelf next to the menus. The waiters were coming on for dinner service, I watched one use an ice cream scoop on a tub of refrigerated butter, plopping the perfect little balls into white dishes. Another slid trays of dinner salads into the stand-fridge. The manager chalked specials on a board. A couple regulars came in and the bartender started making their drinks without being asked.

I looked at L.L. reading Anna Karenina. I thought about Anna throwing herself under her train. I thought about the shower of blood and brain on the bedroom wall of the house in Malibu. I thought about the putrid stain the pack rat left on the floor in Koreatown.

I picked my teeth.

--Guess I was just thinking about you, L.L. Thought I'd

come by and see how you're doing.

He glanced at me, eyes peering just over the top of his glasses. He signaled the bartender and looked back down at his book.

--A banner day. Another beer is surely in order.

L.L. wrote the screenplay, and it was a hit.

It was read by everyone in Hollywood. Dad became the hottest writer in town. Coppola tapped him to adapt Travels with Charley. Redford wanted to know if he'd brush up a remake of The Heart of the Matter. Michael Cimino was looking to do the life of Jim Thomson. Robert Evans thought he'd snagged the Holy Grail, the rights to The Catcher in the Rye. Did L.L. want first crack? Anything and everything with a whiff of the literary, L.L. Crows was at the top of the list to write, adapt, brush up, or take a pass at.

And he took every job. And he wrote some of the most consistently excellent and praised screenplays Hollywood has ever seen. And not a fucking one was ever produced. Nothing that he got screen credit for, anyway. But in the '70s, and through most of the '80s, his red pencil marks had decorated, and vastly improved, he'd be sure to inform you, the pages of a small forest's worth of scripts. Some good, some pure ass. Several Oscar nominees, and a few winners. Not that he gave a fuck one way or another. Because they weren't his stories. He was just the hired gun, getting richer than any human could pray to a fat and greedy Jesus to get.

His story, his admired and lauded screenplay of his one and only novel, walked up and down the runway and had its skirt lifted by every A-list studio/actor/director/producer in town with a yen to take on the what had become the greatest

movie never made, and while it had more than a few dollar bills stuffed in its panties, no big spender ever stepped up to throw down for a trip to the champagne lounge.

A source, one might say, of some slight bitterness in years to come.

--And what are you reading these days?

I looked up from the copy of Down and Out in Paris and London that I'd taken from his pile. I'd scooted over to the stool next to L.L. to make room for a couple that was waiting for a table. Full dinner service in swing, Chez Jay went from elbow room empty to sardine can packed in less than an hour. I'd forgotten.

Sitting at his side, reading silently, sipping at a beer, it came back.

Childhood revisited.

I closed the book.

--Horror mostly.

He rubbed his forehead, kept his eyes in his own book.

--Dare I ask by whom written?

--Whatever. Stephen King, Joe Lansdale, Clive Barker.

He winced.

--Web. Ambrose Bierce, Lovecraft, Stoker, for God sake.

I went on.

--Dean Koontz, Kellerman.

--Edgar Allan Poe, ever heard of him? J. S. LeFanu? Algernon Blackwood?

--James Herbert. Straub.

He slammed his book closed.

--Are you trying to kill me? Did you come here solely to antagonize me and rub my face in your ignorance? Certain tales by Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Edith Wharton for fuck sake, all horror of the highest order. Dear God, Webster, Henry James! Shirley Jackson! Or in later years, Harlan Ellison, Bradbury, Matheson!

I slammed my own book.

--I'm not looking for fucking enlightenment, I'm looking to turn my fucking brain off for a couple hours!

He rose from his stool.

--Turn your hrain off? Turn your?

He began collecting his books.

--Well, I have news for you, Web.

He cradled the books and put his face in mine.

--You have fucking well succeeded at that!

Heads had turned, the manager was coming over.

L.L. took a thick roll of bills from the hip pocket of his faded and baggy madras shorts and flipped a couple hundreds on the bar.

--Sorry about the fracas, Ernesto. My son is a mongoloid, and if I don't speak at a certain volume and pitch he can't understand human speech.

Exit, L. L. Crows, having added to his great legacy of closing lines.

I never heard about how great teaching was when I was a little kid. By then, the mid-eighties, he was one of the senior script doctors of the industry, a go-to guy when a little class was needed on a project, making an obscene living tweaking other writers' illiteracies. All I heard about was how vital the movies were.

People say escapism as if it were some foul bane. As if the denizens of this weary world were not deserving of some surcease and ease. They say it as if that is the only virtue the cinema might possess. As if it is not the great art form of the twentieth century. As if Godard and Fellini and Hitchcock and Cassavetes and Bergman and Altman and Wilder never walked the earth. One movie, one, of only moderate success, it touches more lives than I touched in nearly fifteen years of teaching. The years I toiled in that cesspool of incompetence and mediocrity called the public schools. I shudder, Web. My bowels turn to water when I think of what I might have accomplished. But no regrets, regrets are for small men with

minor minds. We, my boy, we are for scaling mountains, you and I. We are for leaving monuments. A movie, a film, it is a testament in light and color and sound, a record of achievement, a projection of artistic vision penetrating directly into the brains of the audience. They cannot help but be touched, changed, when our words vibrate their eardrums, when the photons carrying our images strike the rods and cones of their eyes. Filmmaking, Web, let no one tell you otherwise, is a noble endeavor, the surest way for giant men to leave their marks upon the landscape of human emotions.

Delivered as he drove me around greater Los Angeles in his 560SL, after keeping me home from school so we could go to the NuArt together to see a Michael Curtiz revival, pointing from time to time with the hand that didn't contain a can of beer.

There, at Wilshire ana Crenshaw, the house that served as exterior for Nora Desmond's mansion. There, the rest home Jack and Faye go to in Chinatown. There, the Ennis Brown House, Price's House on Haunted Hill. The Ambassador Hotel, where Anne Bancroft and Hoffman have their affair. Your mom and I fucked there once. Here in San Pedro, right there, they filmed the Skull Island landing in King Kong. This spot here, Hollywood and Sunset, where Griffith built his Babylonian temple and staged the single largest orgy of all time.

Mom was spending most of her time in Big Sur by then, hanging with the Esalen crowd. Yoga and transcendental meditation and organic hummus and mud baths and, I assume, fucking men considerably younger and less caustic than her older and no longer looked-up-to husband.

So she wasn't around when L.L. got the call that his screenplay had finally been green-lighted. She missed the scene when his ghostwriter pals drove up the canyon to drink

their way through the case of Krug he opened for the occasion. She missed the following morning when he got the final draft of the script from his agent and found that it had been rewritten five times in the year since it had been most recently optioned; thick batches of colored pages mixed into the script, indicating the many hands that had revised his work. She missed the evisceration he performed on the house after reading the rewrites, while I sat out front on my Big Wheel, and Chev and I listened to him creating a whole new lexicon of cursing. And by the time the movie was made two years year later, with Judd Nelson and Molly Ringwald in the leads, directed by John Badham, she had relinquished claims on communal property and left for Oregon to find her true self, unencumbered by the artificial constraints of marriage and rigidity of bourgeois child-rearing concefts. That final exit relieving her of the scene after L.L. went, hope springs eternal, to the premiere.

He sat through it. All one hundred and seventy-nine minutes of it. Sat through every tired cough and forced laugh from the audience, sat through the round of relieved applause as the credits rolled. Sat through the entirety of its mediocrity, and saw it as a movie guilty of the ultimate crime: forget-tability It wasn't even bad enough to be remembered for the incompetence brought to bear. Nor, after all the years and near-misses gone by, were the expectations, or the budget, high enough for it to be held out as a great flop. He sat in the theater, enduring the shoulder pats and congratulations of various sucker fish of the movie business. And I sat in the seat next to him the whole while.

The climax Mom missed by fleeing north was to come the following morning when L.L.'s agent informed him that his name could not be removed from the credits. An Alan Smithee Film would never grace the opening titles. So he began making a bonfire of every bit of movie memorabilia, every treasured celluloid print, stacks of laser disks, collected and bound editions of every screenplay in which his talent

had played a roll, and his SWG membership card, and proceeded to burn down half the house, nearly sending an inferno through the canyon and over the entire range of the Hollywood Hills.

The next day after L.L.'s lawyer got him out on bail for his arson charges, I was enrolled in private school, gifted with a collection of the Great Western Works of Literature, and received my first in a lifelong series of lectures praising the professional educator and condemning popular culture in all its forms.

But never condemning the movies. Which, to tell by their eradication from L.L.'s conversation, were an advancement in entertainment that had never existed at all.

I followed him out to the parking lot, to his current SL, the latest in a line of annual acquisitions. That residual money for the years of hackery still rolling in.

--L.L.

He dropped the books on the back seat of the open-top car, adding them to the small library jumbled there, and turned to me.

--What? What can I do for you that I have not already done? Having seeded you and nourished you and clothed you and educated you, what more is there that I can do at this late date?

I looked at the purple veins in his nose. The swollen feet stuffed into chef's clogs, the spindly legs sticking from the shorts, the sweat-stained fishing hat that covered the melanoma scars on his bald head. I thought about reminding him of a few details from our life. And then not seeing him

again for another two years.

Instead I thought about the dead man's stain soaking through the carpet, maggot trails leading away from motor oil blood and greasy tallow.

I pointed at the car.

--I could use a ride.

He started to raise a pointing finger, and stopped.

--Yes. A ride.

He opened the driver side door.

--Get in then.

I walked around the car and got in and he drove to the parking lot exit and waited for a couple pedestrians on the sidewalk, and I saw him looking down at the pier, at the merry-go-round. He rubbed his mouth, opened it, closed it.

Leaving me to hear what he'd said many times, over twenty years gone down, in this same place.

There, on the pier, the merry-go-round Paul Newman runs in The Sting. Do you want to ride it?

* * *

In front of the apartment L.L. reached into the backseat and knocked through the books until he found the copy of

Anna Karenina he'd abused me with at the bar, and flipped through the pages as I got out of the car.

He closed it and held it out.

--Take this.

--I've read it.

He leaned across the seat and shoved the book into my chest.

--Read it again. It will help keep you from getting any more ignorant than you have already become.

--Well, when you put it that way.

I took the book.

--Thanks.

He put the car in gear.

--Don't thank me. Just read the damn book.

And he was off, tires breaking traction as he squealed away, nearly running over my feet.

I watched him careen around the corner, almost killing a man pushing a bicycle hung with plastic bags filled with empty bottles and cans.

--I'd say it was good to see you, L.L., but I'd be so fucking

lying.

WHAT BEING A DICK GETS YOU

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

--I love Anna Karenina.

I looked at Dot, still on my couch, still in Chev's Misfits T, but now appareled with low-rider jeans, several textbooks scattered around her.

--What the fuck are you doing here?

--Studying. What's your favorite part? Mine's when they tour Europe together.

I walked to Chev's bedroom door and looked inside, finding the usual piles of dirty clothes, overflowing ashtrays, Cramps and Black Flag and Hot Rod magazine posters, and liberally sex-stained sheets. But no Chev.

--What I meant by my question was, what the fuck are you doing here?

She reached under her shirt and scratched at the nipple Chev had pierced.

--I'm taking summer term so I can graduate in three years and they cram like five months of work into like five weeks and I have to study for like three tests and my sister is having her sweet sixteen at the house and she's been watching those shows about those huge birthday parties girls throw and she's doing a theme that's supposed to be Studio 54 but it looks like

it's going to be more like Adult Film Stars of the Future and the place is infuckingsane because she's being an utter and total rag and I have to have quiet so I can pass fucking developmental psychology which is totally kicking my ass.

I put a hand to my forehead.

--But what the fuck are you doing here

She picked up her notebook and tapped a pen with a fuzzy purple ball at the end against the lecture outline neatly printed on the open page.

--Chev said it was cool.

--Chev's not the only one who lives here.

She doodled a little kitty face.

--He said if you were a dick I should remind you that he's the only one paying rent right now.

I dropped the book at her feet.

--Fuck you. Have a book.

She picked it up with one hand, scratching her nipple again with the other.

--Cool! Thanks.

I walked to the kitchen, pointing at her chest.

--And don't do that, it'll get infected and your nipple will fall off and the rich, shallow and handsome afterbirth you're destined to marry will reject you and you'll end up a crack whore.

I opened the fridge and looked at the shelves stuffed with groceries; fresh, organic, very healthy groceries.

--What the fuck?

She settled into the couch, opening the Tolstoy in her lap.

--I took some of the money you left this morning and went shopping.

I closed the door and looked at her.

--Chev is going to shit when he sees food in here that didn't come from the Arby's or the In-N-Out.

She flipped pages.

--No he's not. He likes me a lot. He said so.

I took a package of tofu from the fridge.

--He say that before or after you bought this?

She flipped more pages.

--Doesn't matter. He likes me. I can tell.

--He likes to fuck you.

She looked up from the book.

--Well, duh! I'm a great lay.

I put the tofu back in the fridge and looked for something I could actually eat.

--How would you know, you been fucking yourself lately?

--Hey!

I took my head out of the fridge and looked at her.

--What, did I say something to offend?

She shook her head.

--Fuck no. I just wondered, if I get the book, do I also get this?

She held the book up, showing me the sheaf of hundreds hidden in the pages.

I walked over and looked at the money, tucked into the scene where Levin discovers the joys of physical labor.

--My dad put it there.

--Why?

I picked up the cash.

--I don't know. To apologize for being a dick maybe.

She flipped the pages of the book.

--Well if that's how your family apologizes for being a dick, how much do Iget?

I folded the bills and put them in the breast pocket of my shirt.

--You get to stay here and study.

She closed the book, ran fingers over the cloth cover.

--Hey?

--Mmm.

She looked up at me.

--I'm sorry about that thing.

I looked around, trying to find the thing she was talking about.

--What, the tofu?

She shook her head, pointed at the bookshelf.

--No. That thing. The yearbook. I recognized the name of the school, of course, but I didn't, like, know you were there or anything. But Chev told me. I didn't mean to, like, stir shit up.

She put her fingers on the back of my hand.

--That sucked. I remember when it happened and it totally sucked. I cried all night. So. I'm sorry. You know.

I looked at her fingers on my hand.

--Stop touching me, you stupid plastic bitch.

She pulled her hand back.

I pointed at Chev's bedroom.

--Don't get too comfortable around here. Chev is just going to fuck you until he gets bored, and then stop calling you except for maybe once or twice over the next couple months when he's drunk and needs a booty call.

Her lips thinned, she started collecting her books.

I kept talking, walking to the door.

--And you'll tell your friends that's cool, you can use the hookup, but when you call him to get the same action, he won't even bother to answer. He'll see your name on his phone and put it right back in his pocket and say something about how it's some chick I was hooking up with and now she's strung out on the dick.

She shoved the books into a knapsack and stood.

I waved her down.

--No, no, you stay here, make yourself at home, I'm sure Chev will be back soon for a pit stop.

I went out the door, the copy of Anna Karenina hitting it just as I slammed it behind me.

I stood there, thought about going back in and apologizing. Thought about going back in and telling her some lies about how Chev told me she liked to be pissed on. Thought about staying right where I was and never moving again in my life.

But what's the point? Apologies don't make things better. And you can only hurt someone so much before they stop caring what you do to them. And if I stayed where I was, sooner or later the weird cat lady from down the hall would come out and ask me to help her get that mean calico from behind the dryer in the laundry room and I've been clawed enough by that rabid fucking feline.

So I went down the stairs and around the building and cut down the alley that ran east to Highland, taking the shortcut toward the shop, with a few choice words left in my vocabulary to be directed at my best friend.

In the alley, the homeless couple stood outside their tent, sorting recy-clables between the three barrels mounted on their cart.

--Cocksucker.

--Bitch.

--Fucking loser.

--Fucking whore.

Their matching Mohawks bobbing as they dipped in and out of the barrels, coming up with glass and plastic and aluminum.

The girl glanced at me.

--Hey hey, got any change today?

I put my head down and walked past, skirting the row of cars parked behind the apartments that shared the alley.

I heard her spit.

--Fuck you, asshole! We just live here! We're just alive! Just like you! You don't have to ignore us because we're homeless!

I turned and walked backward away from them.

--I'm not ignoring you because you're homeless. I'm ignoring you because you scream at each other in the middle of the night when I'm trying to sleep. And also because I hate that Santa hat you wear every Christmas because you think it's gonna make people give you more money or something. I'm ignoring you not because I don't like homeless people, but because I don't like you, personally.

I bumped into something, smacking my head hard into whatever it was.

The homeless couple's eyes bugged.

I turned around and got shoved to the ground by a big motherfucker in a ski mask.

He kicked me in the ribs.

--Don't fuck with the guild, asshole.

I curled around the pain.

--What?

He got down on one knee and grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled my head from the ground and slapped my face back and forth.

--Don't! Fuck! With! The! Guild!

Snot and blood ran from my nose as I started to cry.

--OK! OK! OK! No guild fucking!

He took me by the throat and shook me.

--I'm fucking serious!

I choked.

--I know! I know! I know! I can tell by the way you're strangling me!

Two more guys in ski masks appeared behind him.

--Come on, man, let's go, people are watching.

The big one took his hand from my neck and looked at the gaping homeless couple.

--They're just fucking crackheads.

I rubbed my throat.

--Hey just because they're homeless doesn't mean they're crackheads. They could be junkies, asshole.

He grabbed a wad of hair.

--Still so funny, still making me forget to laugh.

I coughed up some bloody phlegm.

--Dingbang?

He made a fist.

--Bang, motherfucker!

The fist came at me.

--Just Bang!

BANG!

I remember a sideways view of Bang and his two buddies getting into a van with bright yellow paint splotched over a

smoothly primered front and side. I remember the van hauling ass down the alley. And I remember the homeless couple coming over and squatting next to me, the girl pouring some water from a bottle onto a rag and wiping at the blood on my face.

--See, that's what being a dick gets you.

And I remember thinking she just could be right.

Then I took a little nap.

--I can stitch it up.

--No fucking way.

--Dude, seriously, I can totally stitch it up.

I slapped Chev's gloved hand from my face, knocking the needle and thread from his fingers.

He shook his head.

--Gonna have to re-sterilize that before I stitch you up.

I covered the gash in my forehead, left when Bang bounced my noggin off the asphalt.

--You are not stitching me up. You aren't even sewing buttons back on my shirt. You are coming nowhere near me or my skin with that needle, man.

He started stripping the black rubber gloves from his

hands.

--Whatever. I don't know why you're being such a puss about it. I use needles on people all the time.

I threw my arms out.

--Asshole, you use them to punch holes in people's genitalia! You wield needles for the purpose of inflicting voluntary bodily mutilations! You don't close holes, man, you make them!

He stuffed the gloves in the waste box on the wall.

--Look at it however you want, man. Way I see it, skin is my metier, flesh my milieu. Modifying the body is my art.

I looked out the open service window at the customers sitting in the waiting room listening to us fight. I looked at him. I closed the shutters over the window.

--Are you high?

He giggled.

--Really high, man.

I put my head in my hands.

--You're high and you were going to stitch my wound?

He took an American Spirit from the pack on the desk and lit it. --Why not? I tattoo high all the time.

--Not the same, man. Not the same.

He blew smoke rings.

--Says you.

I lifted my head and stared at him. I opened my mouth, observed just how red his eyes were, and gave it up.

--Sure. Says me.

I stood up and made the room go sideways and Chev grabbed my arm and eased me back down.

--Whoa there, Hoss. Easy there.

--I'm cool, I'm cool.

I stood again, slower this time, and went over to the mirror on the wall and looked at my face.

--Crap.

There was a knock on the door. Chev opened it and his apprentice Dina stuck her pierced face in.

--Hey I'm doing this.

She held out a stencil of a little pitchfork-wielding devil.

--What should I use?

Chev looked at it.

--Loose seven for the line work. Straight seven for the color. You need a machine?

She squinted, smiled a little.

--Can I?

He picked up a small plastic case from the desk, undid the clasps on the side and took out a chromed tattoo gun and handed it to her.

--Got to get your own gear, lady.

She took the machine from him.

--I know. I'm saving. Thanks.

She started to close the door, saw me and stopped.

--Fuck, Web, what happened? Looks like you got beat up.

I pointed at my split swollen lip, bloody nose and the gash in my forehead.

--Is that what it looks like, Dina? Because I'm afraid you're mistaken. Wounds like these, you only get them one place. Between your mom's thighs when she crosses her legs too fast.

She flipped me off on her way out.

--Fuck you, you dick.

The door closed and Chev faced me, flicking ash on the floor.

--Feeling all better?

I ripped the paper wrapper off a gauze pad.

--I'm getting there.

He stubbed his butt in a tin ashtray with a Hamms label enameled at the bottom.

--Good. Because seeing as the topic of your dickness has come up, I thought we might talk about you being such a huge fucking phallus to Dot.

I pressed the pad over the oozing gash.

--She call you or something?

He fingered another smoke from his pack.

--Yeah, man. She called me. She called to tell me the homeless couple was screaming in the alley for help and that you were all fucked up down there. She hadn't called me, you'd still be there, asshole. And, by the way, she added that you flipped out on her and said some fucked up shit about me.

I used another pad to wipe dry bloody snot from my upper lip.

--Yeah, well, I may have been less inclined to say fucked up shit about you if you hadn't been talking to her about shit that's none of her business and that you should know better than to talk about with chicks you're nailing and that you know damn well you're gonna kick to the curb next week.

He was quiet for a moment, listening to the high buzz of Dina hitting his machine, tuning the power. He put his head out the door.

--Dina, baby, no higher than ten volts on that machine. It'll get squirrelly

He pulled his head back in and closed the door.

--I'm not gonna be kicking Dot to the curb next week.

--Fine. Week after next.

He lit up and blew smoke.

--I like her. I'm not kicking her anyplace. She's cool and she's gonna be around for awhile. Adapt to the concept.

I looked for my Mobil shirt.

--Fine. You adapt to the concept that you shouldn't be talking about some things to chicks you've been fucking for twenty-four hours. No matter how much you're deluding yourself about the longevity of your affections for her.

He leaned his back on the door and folded his heavily decorated, gym-enhanced arms over his chest.

--Web, with all due respect and love, you are not the only one who's dealing with that shit.

I stopped looking for the shirt.

--What?

He raised a hand.

--Look, man, I'm not saying it's the same thing, but we live together. You know? And you're my best friend. And this shit ain't easy. I mean, all this, this whole asshole of the year thing you're doing, it ain't easy. Someone, someone I like, asks me why you're such a dick, that's a complicated answer. Because I want her to know that you're not a dick. Well, not just a dick. That you're cool. So I have to tell her some things. And seeing as how we are best friends and seeing as how we live together and seeing as how because of that, what happens to you has a tendency to rain shit all over me, I don't feel too fucking bad about telling Dot what the hell the deal is.

I touched my swollen lip. It hurt.

Chev moved away from the door.

--Cuz the thing is, man, it's not just you. I mean, I may be about the only friend you got left willing to put up with your shit, and I got to tell you, man, it ain't fucking easy. It is trying, man. It is hard work. And I appreciate you leaving some of Thea's cash this morning. And I think it's great you're doing some work for Po Sin. And if you can't be fucking civil to my friends, I can deal with it. But you have to cut me some slack on how I deal. Cuz like I'm saying, this is not just your thing.

He put a hand on my shoulder.

--OK?

I nodded. I looked at him. I tapped the middle of my forehead.

--You got something here.

He put a hand to his own forehead.

--Here?

I nodded again.

--Yeah, you got a big weeping vagina that's whining meeeeeeee, oooooh meeeeeeee.

He took his hand from his forehead.

--Not cool, man.

I brushed his hand from my shoulder.

--Where's my fucking shirt?

He went to the deer antler coatrack in the corner and tossed me my shirt. I snagged it from the air and the hundreds I'd stuffed in the pocket slipped out and fluttered to the floor.

He looked at the cash.

--Been slingin' dope?

I fiddled with my shirt, picking at some dry blood on the collar.

--No.

He pointed at the money.

--Where'd that come from? Thought your note said Thea sent an ascending sequence.

--She did.

--Thought your note said it ended in nine.

--It did.

--That's like a grand there.

--Yeah.

--So where's it come from?

I didn't look up.

--L.L. gave it to me.

He didn't say anything. I looked up. He stared at me, the muscles under the MOM and DAD tattoos centered on either biceps tensed.

I pointed at the money.

--I didn't ask for it or anything, man. He just, he gave me a book and the money was in there. I. I just went to see him. I needed to. Chev, I haven't seen him in two years. I wanted to see if he was alive for fuck sake. I just. Shit, man.

--Get the fuck out of my shop. Pick up that money and get out.

I squatted and started collecting the money.

--I need to use the phone. I have to call Po Sin.

He crossed to the door.

--There's a payphone on the corner.

I stood, the money in my fist.

--I wasn't gonna spend it, Chev. I was gonna give it away. I didn't even know I had it. He put it in a book.

--Web.

--Yeah.

--I love you, man.

--I know.

He opened the door.

--But if you don't shut up and get out of here right now, I'm gonna love you a lot less, you son of a bitch.

I could have said something else. I could have said something so unbelievably dicky it would have made him laugh. I could have torn the money into little pieces and went and flushed them down the can. I could have done a lot of things. But it was kind of a delicate situation. And I don't have a good track record with doing the right thing in delicate situations.

So I just got the fuck out.

Cuz down to one friend in the world, you tend to get anxious about how long you can hang onto him before you fuck up and do that one last thing that can't be forgiven and you get left all alone for the rest of your life until you die on the toilet in a stinking SRO apartment and no one finds your corpse till it swells up and tumbles from the can and bursts open and even the maggots have had enough of you and move on.

Besides, he had a right to be pissed.

After all, my dad did kill his parents.

It was an accident.

Does that go without saying?

Does it matter?

Does it matter that he didn't actually take a gun from his pocket and shoot them in the face? Does it matter that they were all close friends? Does it matter that they had a

standing Friday night date at the Palm in the Beverly Hills Hotel from years back, from well before my mom took off, from before Chev and me were even born? Does it matter that three of them drove drunk back up the Canyon every week, year after year, always in L.L.'s latest Mercedes, always, even in the rain, with the top down? Does it matter that, despite L.L.'s blood alcohol level, the inquest showed that the true blame for the head-on collision lay with the driver who'd been coming down Laurel Canyon, screaming around corners on the wrong side of the road? Does it matter that L.L. was acquitted of vehicular manslaughter? Does it matter that L.L. did his utmost to adopt Chev, and that, when he couldn't fight the obvious objections, he lent every bit of financial support he could to Chev and his foster family?

No, it fucking doesn't.

Especially if you're Chev.

It might have mattered. It might all have made a big difference.

If L.L. could have kept his mouth shut and never gotten shitfaced one night and, in a classic bit of L.L. theater, decided it was time we knew the true face of God, and revealed to us that he should never have been driving that night. After years of lies.

Still, it might not have mattered, at nearly twenty years of age by then, Chev might have had enough perspective to see why L.L. had lied, and he might have had a big huggy moment with his crazy father figure.

Might have happened.

If L.L. hadn't also revealed that he was having an affair

with Chev's mom and that, at the moment of the accident, Chev's dad had been passed out in the jumpseat, and her mouth had been in L.L.'s lap.

See, as was often the case with L.L., it wasn't so much the fucked up shit he did, as the fact that he had to talk about the fucked up shit he did.

So I understand Chev getting pissed at me for having L.L.'s money in my pocket. Cuz we're not supposed to take his money. Ever. For anything. It was an oath we swore. Nineteen, Chev dropped out of college because he didn't want anything to do with the trust L.L. had set up for him; didn't want his money, and didn't want the education L.L. had told him his mom and dad would want him to have. Didn't want anything to do with anything L.L. touched, said, or thought. And I joined him. Skipped out on UCLA and enrolled at LACC. Having kind of figured out by then that if push came to shove, I'd be better off with Chev in my corner than with L.L. My rare moment of wisdom, recognizing that blood is not in fact thicker than water.

That oath may have kind of been broken by not stuffing L.L.'s money down the garbage disposal the minute Dot showed it to me. But I was too busy being a dick to her to be bothered with that.

Crap.

So I thought about that kind of stuff, the kind of stuff where your dad is kind of responsible for the deaths of your best friend's parents, while I stood next to the payphone at the gas station on the corner of La Brea and Melrose waiting for Po Sin to come and pick me up.

Again, crap.

AS NORMAL AS IT GETS

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

--Motherfucker!

--So is this covered by workmen's comp?

--Motherfucker!

--I mean, if I get beat to crap by the competition, are my medical expenses taken care of? Missed wages? All that shit?

Po Sin drove one-handed, hammering his fist against the roof of the van.

--Mother! Fucker!

He pulled the van into the lot of a two-story strip mall, put it in park, got out and walked into a liquor store stationed between a nail salon and a Pi-lates studio, just under an auto insurance office. I watched him through the glass as he walked to the snack rack and started grabbing things, his lips ceaselessly moving.

Motherfucker! Motherfucker! Motherfucker!

He came out a moment later, got in the van, dropped a sack full of junk food between our seats, ripped open a bag of puffy Cheetos, put it in his lap and started shoving them in his mouth as we pulled back onto Santa Monica Boulevard.

--Moferfuther!

Orange crumbs sprayed the inside of the windshield.

--Mofufer!

I poked a finger in the sack of chips and beef sticks and snack cakes.

--Feeling a little anxious, Po Sin?

He wiped orange dust from his finger onto his pants.

--Fuck you, Web. And, yes, I am. I am a stress eater, OK. When I am stressed I lose composure and self-control and I eat compulsively. That's what happens. You've seen me, right? You see how fucking fat I am, right? You think this shit just happens? It doesn't. I don't have a fucking thyroid problem here, I eat too much and I eat junk food. And I eat more when stressed. And I'm stressed right now. OK? OK? OK?

I leaned away from the crumbs and the spittle filling the air between us.

--Yeah, OK, I get it. You're stressed. You got a right to be. I understand. Hey I'm stressed, too. Which, you know, I think makes a lot of sense in this scenario. Seeing as I was the one who got his face beaten in by your goddamn nephew. Oh, and by the way, I couldn't help but notice that the van he and his friends took off in had been recently vandalized in the same shade of yellow paint that Gabe had under his fingernails this morning. Not that I think the two things are related or anything. Not that I think I've landed in the middle of some kind of dead-body-cleanup range war or anything like that.

He hammered the roof again.

--Fucking Morton! Fucking guild!

--Yes, the guild, interesting that you should mention that. So happens that Bang brought that up while we were chatting. I must confess that I was at something of a loss when the topic came about. Somewhat in the dark, as it were. Perhaps you might fucking enlighten my ass.

He jerked the van to a stop at a red light and turned to me.

--His name is Dingbang, not Bang. It was his grandfather's name. Ding-bang, not Bang.

I folded my arms and put my feet on the dash.

--As long as he doesn't beat me up anymore, he can call himself whatever he wants.

Po Sin snapped his fingers.

--Feet, feet.

--Yes, they are, right there at the bottoms of my legs.

--Off the dash.

I shook my head.

--Uh-uh. Consider it getting my ass kicked for the job tax.

He put more Cheetos in his mouth.

The light changed and we moved forward and I looked at the road ahead.

--Hey hey. Hey where are we going?

--Sherman Oaks.

I took my feet off the dash and pointed at the road.

--But why are we going this way?

--Because it's fastest. Why do you care?

--No, Highland to the 101 is faster.

--No it's not. Not where we're headed.

--Here, turn here!

He kept going straight.

--Fuck, Po Sin, you needed to turn there.

He crumpled the empty Cheetos bag and dropped it in the grocery sack.

--Chill out, Web, this is the way to go. What's your fucking problem?

--Nothing. I just think my way is faster.

He pulled a tube of Pringles from the sack.

--Well you're wrong. Laurel Canyon is the way to go.

I didn't say anything, just put another mark down on the tally sheet, one more point scored by God in our ongoing game of Who's the Bigger Dick.

And we twisted up through the canyon of my childhood, passing the curve, the decisive landmark in Chev's life, me fingering the hundred-dollar bills in my pocket.

Casa Vega is dark as hell.

I'm only guessing about that, mind you, but I'm pretty certain that combination of blackness, dimly illuminated by red glass-filtered candlelight, is the precise effect that would really go in Hades.

Except I doubt they have nachos and margaritas there.

We felt our way past the bar and into the dining room, Po Sin apparently guided by second sight, or an interior compass that always reads true to hot ceramic platters heaped with chili relleno. At the back, under one of the nicer bullfighters on black velvet I've come across, we found Gabe in a red leather booth, his black jacket on against the blasting AC, tie knotted, sunglasses on his face.

We slipped into the booth and he gestured at the food.

--I ordered.

Po Sin grabbed a fork and started digging into a beef-stuffed bell pepper covered in melted cheese.

--Thanks.

Gabe looked at me.

--Eat something. It's good.

I pointed at my face.

--Yeah, I'm sure it is, but aside from the fact that chewing sounds like a bad idea right now, I just don't like eating in an environment where I can't see my fork coming at my face. This crazy fear of stabbing myself in the eye.

Po Sin grabbed my plate and pulled it in front of him.

--Fine by me.

I took a chip from the basket on the table and tried nibbling the corner and the salt got in the cut inside my mouth and I winced and picked up one of the margaritas Gabe had got for us and took a big swallow, but I didn't see the salt all over the rim because it was so fucking dark and that really hurt like a son of a bitch.

--Son of a bitch!

Gabe pushed a water glass my way.

--Sorry about that. Didn't know if you liked them with or without.

I filled my mouth with cold water and swished it around, and that hurt, too.

--Crap.

I looked at Po Sin as he mopped his first plate with a tortilla.

--So look, man, I don't want to be ungrateful for the dinner I can't eat or anything, but are we at the part where I get to know what the fuck, or what?

He scooped guacamole onto a chip.

--Yeah, we're there. We're there.

He ate the chip. And then a couple more. Gabe sat behind his sunglasses.

I slapped the table.

--So what the fuck then? What's the deal? What the hell is the guild? Whatwhatwhat?

Po Sin wiped his lips with a red napkin.

--Aftershock.

--Huh?

--Aftershock is the name of another trauma cleaner. They have a lot of contracts, mostly on the west side. Hotels, office buildings, property management. And they get most of the law enforcement referrals over there. Cops, sheriff's deputies, they're at the scene of a violent crime, someone asks them, How do I clean this up? My baby Huey my little boy was shot here, how do I clean it up? Baby Huey, mind you, is six and

a half feet and over three hundred pounds and he's bled all over the house after getting shot on the porch by the guy who used to be his best friend before one of them fucked the other one's baby mama or some such crap. So the law officer suggests a reliable trauma cleaner who will come in and take care of the situation.

I found a paper-wrapped straw on the table and unpeeled it.

--And he gets a bribe for doing it.

Po Sin waved a finger in the air.

--It's not a bribe. It's a referral fee.

--It's illegal as hell.

--It is that, but it is not a bribe.

I dipped the straw in my margarita and took a sip.

--And the guild?

He lined up the second plate of chili relleno.

--The guild is a racket. Guy who owns Aftershock, Morton, is trying to get all the cleaners to join a guild. Guild will distribute jobs and contracts. Set prices. Broker health coverage, that kind of shit. The more cleaners he can get to sign on, the more pressure he can put on the remaining independents. They don't join, they're gonna have to find a way to live off the scraps of jobs that don't go through the guild.

--And you don't want to join an organization that will help to set the market in your favor and allow you to pool resources because?

He licked his fork clean and set it in the middle of his equally clean plate.

--Because it's a scam, Web. Because the work won't be distributed throughout the guild equally. Because it's set up so that Morton is the president and administrator of the guild, which, seeing as he owns Aftershock, is a rather large conflict of interest. Because the jobs come in and he assigns two out of every three to his own fucking company. So, what, I join and give the guild access to my contracts and contacts, my 7-Eleven gig, my Hyatt contract, my Amtrak deal, all my public housing call-lists, I hand that all to the guild and then what? Fucking Morton takes the sweetest plums for himself and I have to wait and get some shit call to clean up in front of a gas station where a dog got hit by some old lady who couldn't see over the steering wheel.

He propped an elbow on the table and jabbed a finger at me.

--Clean Team is my business. I created it. I built it. I made the contacts and sweated the contracts. Someone calls me, they know what they're getting. Twenty-four hours a day that goddamn phone is on. Someone calls, they have trouble, they're in pain, someone they love has died messy and they are traumatized, I pick up that phone any hour of the day or night. I talk to them civil and gentle. I come as soon as I can. I tell them straight what is involved and what it will cost. The job is harder, takes longer than I thought, costs me more than I estimated, that's my problem, I eat the loss. That's my reputation. Doing the job the way it should be done, that's all I do. And that is worth something.

He leaned in, the tabletop tilting slightly under his weight. I remained very still, having, not for the first time, a sudden awareness of his crushing bulk.

--And I don't give that to anyone. What is in my house is mine. Who is in my house I take care of. My name, my reputation, those are in my house, those are for the well-being of my family. And I will not have my house fucked with.

He inhaled through his nose, a long wheeze, and leaned back into the depths of the booth.

--Especially not by an asshole like Morton.

I poked my straw into the melting ice at the bottom of my margarita glass.

--OK, then can you advise me as to how you will be making allowances to ensure I won't be getting beaten again? Because a police complaint is sounding like a pretty good strategy to me.

Po Sin looked at Gabe. Gabe looked at something, but I don't know what, all I could see was darkness and tiny red flames reflected in his glasses.

Po Sin picked up his margarita and drained half of it.

--The thing you have to remember here, Web, this isn't what you'd call a heavily regulated industry. They set the bar pretty low. Two hundred bucks, proof of a fixed address, and a contract with a licensed hazardous waste disposal company is all you need to be a certified trauma cleaner.

My eyebrows went up.

--Bullshit.

--No bullshit at all. You got employees, you have to pass an OSHA class, but that's it. So, see, you get a mixed bag of types drawn to the trade. At worst, mostly, you get people who are just fucking incompetent and lazy. They give the trade a bad name, but they also go out of business pretty fast. But there is a higher class of worst-case scenario, because some folks are just plain crooked as hell. Whether that means overbilling or maybe cutting corners on a job, whatever. Kind of stuff that Deputy Mercer was talking about with Aftershock. Worser case, you get some straight-up thieves. Go into a house, take advantage of being there while the family is staying in a motel because they don't want to look at the bloodstain that used to be daddy, and they clean it out. Family says, Where's the TV, where's the stereo, where's my stamp collection? These guys say, Oh, that stuff, it was all contaminated, had to be disposed. Contaminated? Shit was on the second floor at the back of a house where daddy did himself in the downstairs bathroom. Or maybe your aunt dies, chokes on her chocolate-covered cherries, lays there for a week with her Pekinese so hungry it takes a few nibbles. These guys come in, they do a great job with the cleaning, you're happy as hell with the deal. Two months later, new charges start showing up on auntie's credit cards. Stuff like that, we'd like it to stop. But we'd also like it not to have too bright a light shined upon it. Those kind of stories get too much coverage, that's bad for everyone's business.

I scooped some ice from my glass and put it in the middle of one of the red napkins and folded the material around it and pressed it to the knot on my forehead.

--Yeah, OK, no cops. So I'm still waiting for the part where you guys stop trading paint bombs and I don't have to

be freaked about this shit happening to me again.

Gabe's phone beeped once. He took it from the clip on his belt, looked at the face, put it back on his belt and nodded at Po Sin.

Po Sin rubbed his nose.

--OK, you've got a handle on that first part. And yeah, there's also been some intimidation happening. Vandalization. Like the paint on the van. Also, job calls come in, you show up at the address and what do you find? Find a vacant lot, find a Chinese caterer where there's supposed to be a private residence. Don't have to think hard to figure who made the call, who's wasting your time and effort. Shit goes back and forth for a few months now. Some tit for tat. The guild trying to show us who's boss. Us showing them we don't work for no one. But you getting beat on, that was new. That was an escalation.

--Oh, lucky fucking me, breaking new ground.

He raised his hand and a waiter materialized from the gloom and placed a check on the table.

--I'm guessing that was my prick nephew at work.

I took the ice from my forehead.

--You're guessing? Man, I already told you it was him.

He placed some money on the check.

--I'm saying that was probably his own thing. Like he was

pissed about being fired, went running to Aftershock. I know Morton, he was more than happy to hire the punk. See what kind of dirt he can dig up on how we go about our business. Maybe find out we cut some corner he can go to the Better Business Bureau about. Fortunately, the kid knows fuckall. But he probably took it personal you were working his old job. Probably decided he'd show his value to his new employer by going the extra yard.

He took his glasses off and rubbed his face up and down.

--So now we have to sort it out, make sure things don't get out of hand.

--Yes, yes, do that, sort it out before it gets out of hand, before, I don't know, before someone gets beaten up or something.

He put his glasses back on.

--You know, Web, you don't want to be involved in any of this, you don't have to be. It's as easy as saying you're done with the job.

I took a chip from the basket and broke it in half.

--I know.

He took one of his empty plates by the rim and rotated it a few degrees, back and forth.

--So are you? Done with it?

I thought about that; not liking it much when someone

pounds on me, I thought about it pretty hard. I thought about chilling out, like I had been for a year. I thought about hanging at the apartment. Sleeping. A lot. I thought about the slender thread dangling my friendship with Chev. And what would happen when it broke. And how much strain I'd already put on it.

I thought about the things I'd thought about most that last year, and how little I'd thought about them the last couple days when I'd actually had something to do.

I crushed the chip and watched the crumbs fall into the basket.

--No, I'm not done with it.

He pushed the table away, making room to rise.

--So let's go then.

I got up and trailed them to the door.

--Where are we going?

Gabe opened the door on the relative brightness of Ventura Boulevard at night. Po Sin went out and passed his parking ticket to the valet.

--We're going to a sit-down with Morton and his Aftershock captains. Make sure we all understand there's limits here. Things we can't be doing without causing trouble for everyone.

I waved my hand.

--I don't want to meet those assholes. I sure as shit don't want to see Dingbang.

The valet drove up in the van and Po Sin slipped him a couple bucks.

--Not to worry, you're not invited.

--OK, so who's taking me home?

He stood aside from the van and gestured at the open door.

--You're not going home, you're going to my shop.

--What? I thought you said I could clean it tomorrow.

--I did. You can. Or you can start tonight. I just need you there.

The valet parked Gabe's Cruiser behind the van and Gabe got behind the wheel.

Po Sin held up a finger to him and looked at me.

--Dingbang has keys to the shop.

--So let him clean it tonight.

--Web, Dingbang has keys to the shop and I haven't had the locks changed yet.

It took a second. I like to think I'm smart, but still it took

a second. Then I got it.

--Fuck that!

He ran a knuckle over his moustache.

--Listen. Listen up here. We're gonna go talk to these guys. Have a couple beers at a place not far from here. It's nothing. It's exactly what they say it is. A negotiation to make sure no one gets carried away. But Gabe, he's a little more cautious than I am, a little less trusting, and he thinks they could use this as a way to be sure the shop is empty. Go in there and mess shit up.

--I know, I get it. That's why I said fuck that.

--It's not gonna happen. OK? All you do is go in, turn on all the lights and hang out. Clean if you want, or watch the TV in the office. Dick around on the computer. Nothing is going to happen.

--Then I don't have to be there.

He looked over at Gabe, back at me.

--I know, you're right, but it will give Gabe a little peace of mind. And one of the things I pay him for is so he has peace of mind. Because when he has peace of mind, I know everything is cool with everything. Make sense?

I shrugged.

--Sure, makes sense. I'm still not gonna sit there and wait for Dingbang

to show and kick my ass again.

--Dingbang will be at the sit-down. To be disciplined. That was part of

the deal. And even if someone comes by, the second they see the lights on,

see someone in there, they'll take off. No one is looking to hurt anyone.

What happened to you was the exception.

--Maaaaan. Crap.

He took me by the elbow.

--Web, this isn't a regular job. This is not nine to five. We clean blood and brains. We scrub shit. We vacuum maggot shells. We inhale gas from rotting corpses. This is not a regular job. And you will rarely be asked to do regular shit if you hang around. Sitting watch on the shop for the night, that's about as normal as it gets. Make sense?

I looked at Gabe, waiting to roll. I looked at the valet, waiting for us to get the fuck out of the way so he could bring the next car around. I looked at Po Sin, waiting for me to do or be something I didn't quite get.

I nodded.

--Makes sense.

He let go of my elbow.

--Then get in the van and get over there.

I got in the van.

--Web!

I looked out the window, he stood in the open passenger door of the Cruiser. --Anything does happen, call nine one one.

I shook my head.

--Yeah, that I can manage.

He waved and got in the car. Gabe nodded at me through the windshield, and tossed me a slight salute.

The man paid to have peace of mind.

Where do I get that fucking job?

NO WOMAN'S TOOL

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

North of Ventura Boulevard, on a street off Burbank Boulevard near the 170 on the edge of North Hollywood, there's a strip of light industrial zoning. Cinder-block buildings that work sheet metal, rent construction equipment, rebuild tractor motors, salvage copper wiring from scavenged conduit, or simply seem to provide nothing but a center point around which to wrap chain link and concertina wire for large barking dogs to patrol without cease. Beat-to-hell late-model pickups, the same ones seen circling West Hollywood

loaded with leaf blowers and weed whackers on weekday mornings, line the curbs. Telephone poles drop power lines to the corrugated roofs of the buildings.

In the middle of this glory I perched on a workbench and stared at a row of three coffin freezers stuffed full of rags, bits of bedding, carpet, sofa cushions, paper towels, and all the other debris soaked in every effluvium of the human body that gets removed from trauma scenes. Biohazardous material awaiting transfer to Saniwaste, then to be trucked to Utah, where such things are burned en masse.

Or so I read in the Saniwaste brochure I'd found on a rack in the office. It was that or the back issues of Entertainment Weekly in the John. Is it a shock the brochures won out?

I slid off the edge of the bench and walked around. I poked at a machine that, according to another brochure, recycled formalin. I wondered what they did with the specimens they removed from the formalin before they processed it. The eyeballs, biopsy tissues, amputations, perforated intestine and whatever that had been preserved in jars of the stuff, the material the brochure referred to as - pathology. I wandered to the window and looked across the street at one of the large dogs patrolling its patch of asphalt. Well, that would be one way of getting rid of the stuff. But they probably ship it to Utah with the rest of the waste.

I went back in the office and turned the TV on and flipped a couple channels and turned it off. I moved the mouse around on the computer, thought about looking at some porn, imagined the implications of jerking off in that particular environment, and discarded the idea. All I needed was another disturbing mental image running around my brain banging at the walls.

Thinking about disturbing mental images made me think about disturbing mental images.

That sucked.

I sat on the edge of the twin bed that was parked in the corner of the office doing duty as a cot. A regular cot being, one assumes, out of the question for Po Sin's needs. I looked at the clock. It was just after midnight. I tried to remember the last time I'd been up that late. Crap, I tried to remember the last time I'd been up past nine PM. It'd been awhile.

It's not like it's a mystery or anything, all the sleep.

Sleeping was just easier than being awake.

So why fight it?

I curled up and stopped fighting. A daily ritual of the last year. Giving up.

Hello, you've reached Clean Team. We're currently out of the office on a job. If you have an emergency we can help you with, please call 1 -888-256-8326. That's 1-888-CLN-TEAM. We'll be there for you.

Beeeeeep.

--Urn, hi, this is, uh, this is Soledad Nye. The woman in Malibu. You cleaned my dad's mess? I mean, oh fuck, that was horrible. You cleaned the house. Anyway. I was hoping I could get in touch with one of your employees. Web. I wanted to talk to him about … anyway. My number, well, he should call me on my cell. The number. Hang on.

I didn't quite kill myself when I jerked out of sleep and slammed my already damaged head into the shelf that hung too low over the bed, but I came close enough that I had to crawl across the floor to answer the phone on the office desk.

--Hello? Hello? Crap! Crap!

--Uh, Web?

--Yeah, yeah, it's me. Oh fucking crap! Jesus.

--Are you OK?

--Yeah, I just kind of, crap, banged my head really hard.

I sat on the floor, back against the side of the desk, phone to my ear, hand clapped over the brand-new lump rising from my head.

--Do you need some ice?

--Sure, yeah, that would be great.

There was some silence.

She cleared her throat.

--Web, you know I'm not there to actually get you the ice, right?

I blinked my eyes a few times, tried to bring the face of the liquid crystal clock on the wall into focus.

--Yeah, I know that. I was being funny.

--Or not.

--Yes, well, being not funny is more my forte.

--I noticed.

The clock straightened out for me. 12:32 AM.

--Yes, it's good of you to call my place of work to leave a message that, I can only assume, would have been meant to make clear my lack of humor-ousness. I'm flattered by the attention. Is there anything else I can do for you now that you have not laughed at me.

--Oh, I've laughed at you.

I took my hand from my head and looked at it. No blood. What luck.

--At me. Just not with me.

--You never know, stranger things have happened.

--Indeed.

I sat there and held the phone. She, I imagine, did the same. I have, I also imagine, less patience than she. Less patience, it's safe to say, than most normal people. Therefore, I cracked first.

--So, Soledad.

Note that the first time I spoke her name out loud I did it without stuttering or squeaking into a register higher than Tiny Tim's. A memory I treasure with some pride. A lesser man would have embarrassed himself with some verbal tic. Not I.

--So, Soledad. Why the fuck are you calling?

--Urn, right. Well, I'd like to say I'm calling to ask if you want to go grab a coffee or something traditionally ambiguous and noncommittal.

Observe how I remain aloof and calm.

--But that's not the case?

--Nooo.

--The case is?

--The case is. I need a favor.

A favor? She's in need? And yet, not a tremor in my voice.

--The favor is?

--The favor is, well, I need something cleaned.

But of course. Was there ever any doubt. My janitorial expertise is required. L.L. would be so proud.

But I'm no woman's flunky.

--What needs to be cleaned, when?

--A room. Now.

I looked at the clock again. 12:35 AM. Clean a room? At 12:35 AM. IS she out of her fucking mind? Does she think I'm an absolute tool?

--Where are you?

Where she was, of course, was that motel. What was in the room, of course, was that blood. Who was with her, of course, was the guy trying to out-asshole me.

A title I was ready to relinquish in light of the butterfly knife he flashed at me.

If that all rings a bell.

HOW BREATHING WORKS

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

The guy with the fauxhawk showed me his blade, a slight crust of dry blood gummed at the hilt.

--Say that again? Say it. About to go Bruce Lee on your ass here, you keep talking about my moms.

I put my back to the door and shifted the carrier of cleaning gear so that I held it in front of me.

--Hey no, all done, I'm not saying anything.

He took a step, twirled the knife.

--I fucking thought not, asshole.

--Did it hurt?

He stopped walking, the knife stopped twirling.

--What?

I spoke very slowly.

--When. You. Thought. Did it hurt? Like because you're not good at it, I mean.

He slammed his forearm across my throat, pinning me to the door, the point of the knife poking my cheek.

--Asshole! I said shut the fuck up! I said it was a wrap!

I thought about bringing up the carrier and shoving it into his gut, but the last time I'd fought anyone other than Chev was in junior high. And that was scrawny Dillard Hayes who'd made some lame joke about Chev not having a mom and I'd gone whacko about it. And I got the shit kicked out of me. And Dillard didn't have a knife.

So I tried diplomacy instead.

--No, you didn't actually tell me to shut the fuck up. And you certainly didn't say anything as lame as-GAH!

No, he didn't say GAH! I said GAH! Or, rather, I kind of barked GAH when he drove his knee into what was meant to be my balls, but was actually the carrier, which then hit my balls.

--GAH! GAH!

He did it twice more. If that didn't communicate.

The bathroom door swung open and Soledad came out toweling her hands dry.

--Jaime!

This seemingly directed at the fauxhawk dude about to put his knee on the money for the fourth time.

He let go of me and turned.

--What! What!

I dropped to the floor and tried to figure out how breathing worked.

Soledad came and kneeled next to me.

--What the hell, Jaime?

Jaime waved his knife.

--He was being an asshole, just like you said he would be!

She put a hand on the side of my face.

--I said he might act like an asshole and you needed to be chill.

He pointed the knife at me.

--Why do I have to be chill when he's being the asshole?

She shook her head, looked at me, her face all but hid in the long curls of hair falling around it.

--You OK?

I squirted more tears and kept my hands jammed in my crotch by way of an answer.

Jaime came and leaned over her and looked down at me.

--Besides, he deserved it for being an asshole at your house today.

She looked up at him.

--He wasn't. Fuck, Jaime, he was trying to make me laugh.

He raised his hands over his head.

--See! That's sick, man. Your dad offs himself, blows his fucking brains all over, and this asshole tries to make it funny? That's sick shit.

She stared at him, shook her head.

He raised his shoulders.

--What? What did I say? He's the one made jokes about your dad eating a bullet. Why'm I getting bitch looks?

She looked at the floor.

--Just shut up. Shut up and have a drink.

--What'd I do?

She put fingertips to her forehead.

--Please, Jaime. Just. Chill and have a drink. Please.

He reversed the gesture with his wrist and thumb, folding the knife and tucking it back in its sheath.

--Fine. Whatever. Just want people to remember, this whole production, it's my deal. We got a schedule to keep to here and I don't like falling behind.

He walked to the room's lone chair, almonds popping under the heels of his chrome-studded ankle boots, took a seat, and picked up a white plastic shopping bag from the floor.

--So you just get the asshole up to speed and on set. I want to roll this thing and wrap.

He reached in the bag and pulled out an airline bottle of Malibu rum.

--Incidentals keep popping up and throwing my budget to shit.

I pointed at him.

--Let me guess, you're an actor, but what you really want to do is direct?

He drained the bottle and threw it across the room and it bounced off my forehead.

--Fuck you, asshole, I'm a fucking producer.

Soledad closed her eyes, shook her head, opened her

eyes, and looked at me.

--Web, meet my brother Jaime.

--It's not as bad as it looks.

I sat on the closed lid of the toilet, the plastic bag of ice she got from the machine by the motel office resting between my thighs.

--See, the funny thing about that statement is the fact that it looks so very very bad, that there is ample room for it to be not as bad as it looks and still be chronically fucked up.

She took the wet hand towel from my forehead.

--I know. Still. It's not as bad as it looks.

I looked at the blood on the towel in her hand.

--Well then, that explains all the relief pouring over me at this moment.

She bent and peered at the gash in my forehead, reopened when Jaime kneed me and I bit the floor.

--This should be stitched up. Want me to take a crack at it?

--What? No. What the hell with people who don't have any medical training at all wanting to stitch my tender flesh?

She straightened and dabbed the towel on my head again.

--I don't know. Just something I always kind of wanted to try.

--Stitching up an open wound?

--Yeah. Weird, huh?

I didn't bother with an answer, the weirdness of such a desire going without saying. The sexiness of it not being something I wanted to get into. As it would suggest too much about my own weirdness. A quality already on abundant display in my current mode of employment. Also by the fact that I was sitting in a motel bathroom at one thirty in the morning with a bag of ice in my bruised crotch and a beautiful and bookish and emotionally complicated young woman tending to my hurts while her brother got tanked in the adjoining blood-splattered room.

Instead, I got straight to the most important matter at hand.

--You smell great.

She took the towel away again.

--It must be the rose petals I've been bathing in.

I inhaled.

--Could be.

She tossed the towel in the sink.

--Or the deodorant I've been spraying on myself to cover

the fact that I haven't bathed since my dad died two days ago.

I nodded.

--So I am kind of an asshole, huh?

She boosted herself on the sink and dangled her feet.

--You do have some moments of impropriety.

I took the ice bag from my nut bag and touched my numbed genitals.

--Yeah, certain things bring it out in me.

She picked up a pack of cigarettes sitting by the basin and put one between her lips.

--Like having the future generations of your family name put at risk?

I dropped the ice bag in the tub.

--Like being asked to an apparent murder scene to clean it up.

She struck a match and placed the flame to the end of the cigarette.

--Oh, that.

She shook the match out and let it fall to the floor.

--Jaime didn't actually kill anyone.

She blew some smoke.

--He just cut him up a little.

I rose from the can, testing my ability to move with a dangling pendulum of agony between my legs.

--Oh, is that all? Well then, let's get to work.

--He was being an asshole, asshole.

--One assumes.

--What?

I took my head from under the bed, where I was shining a flashlight looking for stray blood, and looked at Jaime.

--One assumes he was an asshole. Otherwise, one assumes, you would not have cut him up a little.

I looked at Soledad, standing by the open door of the bathroom, arms crossed, a cigarette she only occasionally bothered to drag from between the fingers of her left hand.

--That was the phrase, was it not? He just cut him up a little.

She looked from the floor.

--Yeah, that was it.

Jaime waved the latest in a long line of Malibu nips.

--A little? I just about did a Silence of the Lambs on him. Just about peeled him raw.

I looked again at Soledad.

She shook her head.

Based on the amount of blood I'd seen at her house, and how much less there was here, I was inclined to think he was full of it. But thinking isn't knowing. Is it?

So, not knowing which of them to believe, I went back to work.

I'd done as I saw Po Sin and Gabe do at the Malibu house, started at the top and worked my way down. Like cleaning a dirty window. There hadn't been anything on the ceiling, but along one wall next to the bed there was a nice spackling of blood that rose nearly to the top. I'd worked my way down it, spraying with a bottle full of Microban and sopping it up with paper towels that I dropped in the room's waste basket. To be disposed of later.

Jaime narrated as I worked.

--See, if he'd just come in here and conducted business in a responsible manner, I wouldn't have had to cut him. I mean, I understand that in this business contingencies sometimes arise without having been accounted for, but it's not the exclusive burden of the producer to absorb those costs. The deal starts going all Waterworld, I don't see where I should be on the hook for the overages. He got all the situation has changed. Shit like that. I told him, said, Dude,

I'm working this deal on a short schedule with, like, no budget at all. So maybe you should get out of my fucking face before I fucking cut your ass. He didn't listen. All that blood up there, that's where he freaked out, started waving his arms around after I'd cut his hand. He'd stayed still he wouldn't have got blood on my new jeans and I would have left it at that. As it was, I had to stick him to make him sit down and shut up. Gave him a poke in the shoulder and he settled down. Wadded up those sheets and got them over the hole to stop the bleeding.

By that point in the conversation I'd shot about my hundredth look at Soledad, all of them saying pretty much the same thing: What is the nature of his birth defect, and do you have the same one?

Her looks in reply clearly indicating: I know, I know, just please don't f revoke him because I don't want to fetch any more ice for your swollen testicles.

Still unsure if Jaime was a congenital moron or just your average drunk fucking idiot infected by a particularly nasty form of the Hollywood Virus, I was working my way down the wall, deliriously happy that the blood hadn't had time to seep through the wallpaper, as he drew his tale to a close.

--Asshole wanted to take the sheet with him. Fuckin' believe that? Told him, No way, man, I'm on the hook for this room. Those sheets end up on my bill if they go missing. That's not an expense I'm gonna carry. Asshole.

That detail bringing me up to where I was looking under the bed, finding nothing worse than more almonds.

Jaime pointed at the sheets.

--Way I figure it, some bleach'll get those spie an' span. 'Course, I'm not much when it comes to cleaning, doing laundry, whatever, but I knew Sol would be able to help.

He smiled at his sister.

--She's always good for lending a hand. Any wonder I got pissed when she told me some asshole'd been messing with her today of all days. Then she's gonna call that asshole to help us out over here? I mean, what the fuck, right?

He pointed at her.

--Above-line expenditures kill a production, Sol.

She looked at the long ash on the end of her cigarette, tipped it and watched it fall.

--I'm just trying to help, Jaime. I can leave at any time.

--Aw, don't be like that. Get all bitch on me.

--A bloody hotel room's not the same as when you dropped the cookie jar. Something happens to that guy you cut, you want this room to be more than spie and span.

--Nothin's gonna happen to him. He was fine. I just didn't want to pay for, you know, room damages and shit.

She stared at the tiny coal at the end of her nearly dead smoke.

--Fine. Whatever you need. Taken care of. No problem.

--Shit, Sol. C'mon.

I got to my feet.

--Well, I don't think the room's gonna pass any kind of close scrutiny by a team of crack experts with ultraviolet lamps, but it's as clean as I can make it.

And it was. Walls and furniture gleaming in the lamplight. The only signs remaining to tell that the carpet had been bloodied were patches where the original color showed brighter from my scrubbing. The offending bedding stuffed in the wastebasket with the paper towels.

A job well done.

A potentially very criminal job, well done.

Details, details, details.

Jaime lurched up from his chair, scattering the litter of tiny bottles at his feet, and toed the wastebasket.

--So all you gotta do is wash those out an' you can get the fuck out of here.

I peeled the rubber gloves from my hand and dropped them on top of the stained sheets.

--Jaime, my man, I don't know how to tell you this, and I don't much want to, but I'm afraid you're going to have to eat the deposit on the sheets.

He watched me as I packed the cleaning gear back into

the carrier.

--Fuck is that supposed to mean?

I wedged a pack of disposable paint scrapers into the carrier.

--It means that shit is not coming out.

--Little bleach. Fuck do you know?

I pointed at the sheets.

--I had a girlfriend once, had the heaviest periods you ever saw. Dated the girl for over a year, and I threw away enough sheets in that year to know a lost cause when I see one. Those are dead soldiers.

Soledad came over.

--Can you get rid of them for us?

I nodded.

--Yeah, I can get rid of them. I can do that.

She nodded.

--Thanks.

I bent to pick up the wastebasket and Jaime slapped my hand away.

--Fuckin'way man. Sheets stay here.

I looked at the clock. Almost four. My eyes ached. My head and my mouth throbbed. I don't want to talk about how I felt below the waist. Suffice to say, I was really looking forward to lying down.

I picked up the carrier.

--OK by me, the sheets stay here.

I started for the door and heard his knife snap open behind me.

--Fuckin' freeze, asshole. No one leaves till these sheets are clean and this location is wrapped.

I turned and looked at him, swaying drunk, knife in hand.

I set the carrier on the dresser, between the TV and the lamp.

--Do you have a gun?

--What?

I looked at Soledad.

--Does he have a gun?

She tossed the stub of her smoke through the bathroom door in the direction of the tub.

--No.

Jaime twirled the knife, almost lost his grip on it, recovered, settled into a credible kung fu stance that I was pretty sure I recognized from Chev's copy of Game of Death. --Don't need a gun.

I picked up the lamp, knocked the shade from it, yanked the plug from the wall, turned it upside down and showed him the pointed corners of the heavy wood base.

--And I have a lamp. If you take one more step toward me with that knife, I will hit you as hard as I can with this lamp. If you die, I will clean up the mess and leave. If you don't die, you can clean up your own blood. Asshole.

He looked at his sister.

--Sol?

She went to the closet and got a jacket and pulled it on.

--Don't look at me, Jaime.

He jabbed the knife at the air.

--Dude's threatening your brother. Gonna let that happen?

She walked to the wastebasket.

--Still willing to get rid of this stuff?

I hefted the lamp.

--Yeah. Sure.

She picked up the wastebasket.

--Can I come with?

--Sure.

She came to my side of the room and picked up the cleaning carrier.

--Let's go.

I followed her to the door, eyes on Jaime, the lamp held out.

--It won't cost much, they're crap sheets.

He dropped his arms to his sides, knife dangling from his fingers.

--Fuck do you know? Didn't even clean up the almonds, asshole. Fucking don't call me, I'll call you, fucker.

And I backed from the room, pausing to set the lamp inside the door before I closed it and ran for the van, taking the carrier from Soledad, she taking my hand, running along with me. Laughing.

ONLY A SMALL EARTHQUAKE

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

--How'd you get out here?

--Taxi.

I took my eyes from the road.

--You took a taxi from Malibu to Carson?

She kept her eyes closed.

--Yeah. They say when you've had a loss in the family, a sudden and unexpected loss, they say driving is a bad idea.

--Why's that?

--Because you're distracted, I guess. I mean, I don't know by what. Unless they mean the memory of finding your dad with his head blown all over the room.

She opened her eyes, shook her head, pinched her cheek.

--I think I'm going to have to learn not to be so flippant about that. I'm not handling it as well as I thought I could.

--So the taxi was probably a good call.

--Probably. Of course, the driver no doubt assumed I was coming down here for a late-night hookup with some rough trade I'd been chatting with online. But I'll live with the dim opinion of my cabby this once.

--We should all be so well adjusted.

She waved a hand.

--Well, well adjusted, let's not get carried away.

I smiled.

--Yeah, especially as your brother seems to have the market cornered on that particular quality.

--He's really just my half brother.

--Yeah, same mom, I got that.

She stopped inspecting the glories advertised on the massive illuminated signs looming over the 405 North mega car lots of Torrance, and looked at me.

--How'd you get that?

I hit my blinker and changed lanes to get out from behind a Pinto stuffed with the amassed possessions of its owner; boxes and bags heaped from the floorboards to the headliner and smashed against the windows, leaving just enough space for the driver, one of the rolling homeless of L.A. I glanced at him, talking endlessly to himself, as we passed.

I looked back at the road ahead.

--He kept saying your dad. I just assumed that meant you had different dads is all.

She looked back at the signs.

--Oooh, Detective Web at work. Did you suss out any more family secrets?

--Just that the black sheep of the family back there is also a fucking moron.

--Hardly a secret, that one.

--Yeah, he does rather wear it on his sleeve.

She began going through the pockets of her jacket, searching.

--He's actually kind of OK. Or he was, anyway. When we were kids. Just spoiled mostly. And starved for attention.

--Interesting combination.

She came up with a hair bungee from her pockets and began to pull her hair into a ponytail.

--Well, my mom is an interesting woman with strange abilities. Especially when it comes to screwing with her kids' heads.

I adjusted the shoulder strap of my seatbelt where it snugged too tight across my neck.

--Yeah, moms are tricky that way.

She got her hair where she wanted it, a couple wild curls

poking loose, and settled back into her seat.

--Our mom is a little more than tricky. Her special talent with Jaime was to give him anything and everything he asked for. This being the easiest way she knew to keep him occupied, and keep her from having to actually deal with him as, I don't know, a human being. Jaime's response was to ask for more and more extravagant toys, trips, parties, whatever he thought would force her to deal with him, I guess.

--How'd that work out for him?

--Well, I didn't witness much of it, not wanting to be around her myself, but the way I put it together, the more he asked for, the more she worked to make the money to see he got it, the more he got, the more he asked for, and the more she worked … and so on.

--Kind of a perpetual motion machine of familial alienation, then?

She slid her eyes at me.

--That was clever.

I rubbed my eyes.

--Yeah, clever, that's me, always doing clever stuff. That's why I'm in this van at the moment with a load of someone else's bloody sheets and all.

She went in her pockets again and came out with a pair of big black plastic film star sunglasses.

--I said it was clever, not smart.

--True.

She took off her regular narrow black-framed glasses and slid the sunglasses on.

--Anyway, Mom just worked and worked to get Jaime what he wanted, which meant she was never around to look at him, which is what she wanted. Until he turned eighteen.

--Then what?

--She kicked him out. Of course. If behavioral scientists had designed a scenario meant to create an adult utterly unequipped to provide for themselves and emotionally cope with the world, they could not have done a better job than my mom did with Jaime. And, to make it more interesting, when she set him loose, she did it in Hollywood.

The lights of a jumbo jet cruised over the freeway on approach to LAX. Inglewood sprawled low and wild to the east, endless stucco blocks of small houses with barred windows and dead lawns.

--It's a tough little town, ain't it.

She shrugged.

--It's designed to fuck the weak is all.

--And how'd you avoid the mommy treatment?

She leaned forward and adjusted the heater.

--Dad divorced her when I was three. Seeing as she didn't want to have the responsibilities of actually raising kids, it wasn't much of a challenge for him to get custody. And by then I'd already started loathing her pretty well. I mean, Dad didn't have to run her down at all to make me not want to see her. Not that he would have done that. Still, holidays, occasional weekends, he'd pack me up and drive me over to the valley. It sucked, but it got better when I was five and she had Jaime. He was cute. And fun.

--Till he grew up and turned into a prick.

--Like I said, he had help.

--We all get help, that doesn't mean we all end up cutting guys up in motel rooms after a drug deal turns sour.

She fingered her sunglasses lower on her nose and gave me a look over the tops of the lenses.

--My, how very hard-boiled of you.

--I'm just saying.

She pushed the sunglasses back into place.

--I know what you're saying. And you're mostly right. He's definitely defective. But he's my brother. So I. You know.

--Sure.

--Anyway, it wasn't a drug deal.

--No? Stocks then? Commodities futures?

--I don't know. I mean, he does deal some stuff. Weed and ecstasy mostly. Works craft services and deals to the P.A.s and the extras. That knife, he was on set for a John Woo movie, one of the prop guys traded the knife for a few hits of X. He loves that knife. Anyway, whatever he's up to, it's not drugs. Jaime always gets into something crazy. Usually it's something having to do with movies. I don't think so this time. But movies is what it usually is. He's going to get the rights to some Hungarian sci-fi movie. He's going to manage the movie career of a Balinese pop star who's the Madonna of Indonesia. He's going to negotiate U.S. distribution for a Canadian production company that specializes in remaking Paraguayan classics. That kind of thing. Movies. He got it from my mom.

I slid into the interchange lane for the 10 West, thinking about L.L. and the movie game, and what it does to people.

She pointed at the sign for the 10.

--Where are you going?

--Take the 10 out to the PCH and up to Malibu.

She sat up and reached toward the wheel.

--No, no, don't, just. Just go.

She grabbed the wheel and shoved it to the left, sending us veering in front of a barreling SUV.

I slapped her hand.

--Hey! Hey!

The SUV cut around us, horn sounding.

She took her hand from the wheel as the exit to the 10 slipped away behind us.

--Sorry.

She put her face in her hands.

--Sorry.

She took it out and looked at me.

--I don't want to go west right now. I don't want to go home. I want. Oh fuck.

Tears were leaking out from under the lenses of the sunglasses.

--Shit, Web. Shit. My dad.

I nodded.

--Yeah, no problem. Shit. I get it.

I stayed with the 405, looking ahead to where it would climb through the Santa Monicas and meet the 101 on the other side.

--I got a place to go.

She pushed her fingers up under her sunglasses and wiped her eyes.

--Thanks.

I drove, thinking about families. Not my favorite pastime, but one I seem incapable of avoiding. I glanced at her from time to time, black hair pulled back, light olive skin flushed, muscles of her long neck taut as she bent to lean her head against the window, the sky lightening beyond her above the rim of the San Gabriels. And all that shit.

I thought to distract her from her sadness, strike a chord of shared experience. You know, cheer a girl up.

--So. Your mom's in the biz? So's my dad. Or he was. Screenwriter. What's your mom do?

She rolled her head around, pointed the big lenses at me, rolled back against the glass.

--She was a porn star. So I guess we both have parents who were whores.

I drove some more. Choosing wisely, I think, not to talk anymore.

--I suppose it was naive of me to think you were going to take me to your place and tuck me into your bed while you slept protectively on the floor, wasn't it?

I watched her as she flipped through Po Sin's binder of before-and-after photos from various job sites, sunglasses still over her eyes.

--I thought this might be more romantic.

She froze on a picture of a shotgun suicide, turned the page to a picture of the same room after it had been cleaned.

--You could play that game with these, you know: What's the difference between the pictures?

She flipped back and forth between the two shots, the one featuring glossy pink bits that looked almost like strange candy, and the one of a scrupulously clean livingroom stripped of odd bits and pieces. Pointing to where a sofa cushion had been removed, the shade from a lamp, a square cut from the carpet, a blank spot on the wall where a piece of needlepoint used to be.

She closed the binder.

--Looking in his bedroom. No mattress. This lap blanket he used to cover his feet with when he sat up at night working in bed. He'd sit on top of the covers in a robe and drape it over his bare feet, you know. That's gone. And he always, always had a handkerchief folded on the nightstand. That's not there. Just things, they tell you someone's gone. And they're not coming back.

She put the binder back in its place on the office desk and spun around a couple times in Po Sin's chair.

--So, Web.

I sat on the bed.

--So, Soledad.

She put her feet down and stopped spinning.

--Do we have to do it this way?

--Which is to say?

She got up, took off her jacket, draped it over the chair, and walked over to the bed, where I sat scooted into the corner of the room, my back against the wall.

--Which is to say, do we have to tease this out with all kinds oiwill we or won't we?

She put a hand to the wall and lifted one foot and unlaced her sneaker and kicked it off.

--I hate that shit.

She did the same with the other shoe.

--I mean.

She reached under the skirt of her dress, the same black knit knee-length she'd been wearing at the Malibu house, and pushed her black leggings down, stepping first on one toe to pull her foot free, and then on the other, kicking the leggings away, her light blue panties nestled inside them.

--I mean, can't we just fuck?

She took hold of the waist of her dress and peeled it over her head and dropped it, standing flat-chested and braless, naked except for her sunglasses.

--Fuck and get it over with?

I could see part of a Quonset hut out the window behind her, a bit of sky turning blue, old-growth palm trees arching up from the streets, brown rocket trails detonating into green tufts. It was chilly in the office. Goose pimples on her stomach.

I quickly sorted and discarded several responses, none of them delicate enough for this circumstance; a wounded and emotionally vulnerable young woman naked and throwing herself at me in my place of employ.

Finally knowing what to say.

--So romance isn't dead after all?

She smiled, put her knees on the edge of the bed, edged close to me, reached out and poked the wound on my forehead.

--Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Web.

I winced.

--I'm not looking at your mouth.

She took hold of my hoodie and pulled it over my head, not bothering to unzip it.

--Wise man.

I watched her hands as they undid the buttons down the front of my shirt.

--I don't know when Po Sin will be here.

She took me by the collar of my T and pulled me forward and pushed the Mobil shirt down my arms.

--I don't care.

I lifted my arms and let her pull the T off.

--And, you know, all joking aside, my balls still really hurt.

She tossed the T over her shoulder and it landed on top of her dress.

--I'll be gentle.

She reached for my belt.

So.

She wanted to fuck. And get it over with. Who was I to say no?

A very little later, while she was on top of me, not being gentle at all, the earth moved. It was only a small earthquake, but it made us both laugh.

And, finally, I reached up and took the sunglasses off her face, and I could see her eyes, so very red from all the crying.

And a little later after that, she had them back on.

--He hated my smoking.

I held the lit cigarette for her as she pulled her leggings up.

--He smoked like a chimney when I was a kid.

She picked up the Mobil shirt from the floor and put it on and took the smoke from me.

--Thanks.

She put it in her mouth and started buttoning the shirt.

--But he stopped and was one of those classic ex-smokers. A pain in the ass.

She found one of her shoes and sat back on the edge of the bed.

--I mean, I don't even smoke that much. And when I smoke at the house I only do it on the deck or in my room.

She put her right foot in the shoe and started lacing it up.

--Anyway, I was there, this was during a Christmas break when I was in college, a few years back, four or five. Before I graduated and didn't know what the hell to do with a degree in art history and moved back home.

She bent and looked for the other shoe.

--There it is.

She pulled it from beneath the bed and put it on.

--So I was at home, on break, and we'd stayed up together watching It's a Wonderful Life or something, and I'd been smoking a lot because we were having some Christmas cheer together. I was standing with the door to the deck open, blowing smoke outside. After he went to bed, I stayed up to watch something else. White Christmas'? I don't know. But I cheated and snuck a cigarette inside. Didn't finish it though.

She turned, facing me, left foot tucked under her right thigh.

--And I was a little loaded so I forgot to put the ashtray back out on the deck. And in the morning.

She leaned and snagged her jacket from the back of the chair and reached into an inside pocket and came out with a small journal.

--In the morning I came down and found this.

She opened the journal and flipped some pages and pulled out and unfolded a deeply creased sheet of notepaper.

She handed it to me.

FROM THE DESK OF WESTIN NYE

WESTLINE FREIGHT FORWARDING AND TRADEWhen I was smoking (in the 1970s) I learned that when returning to a partially smoked cigarette, you should put it to your lips (before lighting it) and blow your breath out and through it--thus removing most of the foul-tasting residue that you would otherwise be drawing into your mouth on your first "drag" after lighting up.With love,

your fatherI handed it back, and found my T on the floor and pulled it on.

--Did you crawl into a closet and bang your head against the wall?

She stood and went to the door to the bathroom.

--No. I laughed. He didn't mean it to be funny. Which made it funnier. Which was kind of his style.

She fiddled with one of the buttons on the old blue gas station shirt that hung to tops of her thighs.

--I keep thinking there's a good laugh in his suicide somewhere. But I haven't found it yet.

She ducked into the bathroom, the taps ran, she came out with her cigarette doused and pitched it in the overflowing wastebasket by the desk.

--I think I need to go.

--OK. Let me get my shit together and I'll give you a ride.

I started looking in the blankets for my jeans and underwear.

She shook her head.

--No. I want to walk a little.

I found my BVDs and pulled them on, taking particular

care as I snugged them into place.

--Pretty long walk to Malibu.

She looked out the window, balled her dress tightly and stuffed it into one of the large outer pockets of her jacket.

--I can catch the bus in Sherman Oaks and over the hills and out to Santa Monica. The coast bus from there. I'm not, as you may have noticed, in a hurry to be home.

I sat with my jeans in my lap.

--Sure, but the bus sucks.

She shrugged.

--I like the bus. I like to watch the sides of the road.

I looked at the floor, trying to keep a lid on something that didn't seem to want to cooperate at that moment of exhaustion and postcoital confusion.

--I don't like buses.

--Don't like riding them?

That was a tricky question.

--No. I mean, yeah. I don't like riding them. But I also just kind of don't like them.

--Have you always felt this hostility toward public

transportation?

--Not public transportation. I'm fine with light rail or trams. Subways. Just buses I don't like.

--Forever?

I thought about that. But I didn't need to, really, I knew it wasn't forever.

--Urn, no, no, not forever. I used to ride them quite a bit.

--When you were a kid?

--No. I mean, yeah, but.

Words just kept occurring to me, kept finding ways to put themselves together. While I was trying to corral one bunch, another slipped out. These were the next ones.

--Yeah, come to think of it, it is kind of a new thing. Not liking buses. Hating them, really.

She took a step over.

--Web, you're killing me. Are you serious? Are you trying to cheer me up? Because I hate that. If you're making this up to cheer me up I will be so fucking pissed at you.

Again, I tried to get things under control, knowing where this conversation ended. Not wanting to go there. Ever again.

But things, they have a way of going out of your control

sometimes. Have you noticed that?

And I kept talking.

--Yeah. Hell yeah. I mean, no. I mean, really, I can't stand the things. Make me crazy.

--Why?

She folded her arms.

--I want to know why. You better not just be trying to get me to hang around longer.

I laughed.

--Well, they're loud and they smell. They get in the way. And they're really kind of ugly.

She smiled.

I took this as encouragement and kept talking, something that's rarely gone well for me in my life.

--And they're haunted.

She raised her eyebrows.

I raised a hand.

--No, no. Really. This is so strange. I don't know. Just this thing. Kind of started. Something happened and I started not liking them.

She laughed. Sort of.

--Because they're haunted?

I rubbed the spot between my eyes and squinted.

--Yeah, OK. Urn, let me think.

--You're lying. You're so trying to sucker me.

--No, I'm not.

--You totally are. You're trying to think of something funny to say. You are fucking with me and you are so busted.

I laughed again.

--No. It's just that it's complicated and I sometimes, I don't know, forget exactly how.

I looked up at the sky outside the window.

A piece of it snapped off and dropped and hit me on the head.

And it was all there again, the whole thing, back in my head, one picture, entire. No longer broken into the little fragments I liked to keep it scattered in. Fragments hidden on ghost buses cruising L.A. Freighters of lost things. But not of me.

I looked at Soledad, who'd just helped me to put it all together again.

And I thought, How kind of her.

--No, I got it! Yeah, huh, it's funny. You know. Because, it's not like I forgot. It's more like I think about it all the time. So I kind of forget it's there. Like white noise?

She tilted her head.

--Web?

--Yeah, funny thing. Totally fucked up, but funny in a distinctly not ha-ha way.

--Web. Hey.

--Weird how I had to think really hard to remember the … details? Details. Yeah.

--Are you OK?

--Yeah, I'm fine. So I was on this bus. I was teaching. I was a teacher before. Did I tell you that? I was. My dad always wanted me to be a teacher. Well, not always, but that's a long story. So I was a teacher. And I was on a bus. With my class. Fifth grade. Ten- and eleven-year-olds. Great age for kids, I think. Because they're really coming into their own as people, but the hormones haven't gone entirely berserk yet. They're mostly still kids. So my class and two other classes a little younger are on this bus. It's a field trip. Remember those?

--Sure.

--Yeah. This was cool. Did you grow up in L.A.? Cuz

when you grow up in L.A., when I was a kid anyway, you always, sooner or later, you always go up to the Griffith Observatory. The planetarium. But it had been closed for renovations for like a year. Then it reopened. So we were going. I'd had to twist arms to make it happen. Field trips are a major production these days. So we were going. And we're riding in the bus. Lalalala. Kids talking, yelling, texting to the kid in the seat next to them. Kids in the back of the bus shoving each other and playing with toys they're not supposed to have because they start fights over them. I'm walking the aisle, talking to kids. Talking to this kid Tameka. Cute girl. She's pissed at one of her friends over this hat she's been wearing that no one else had, but now her friend is wearing the same hat and she doesn't understand how her friend could bite off her style like that. And we were talking about that. So then. Urn. Crap. What happened then? Oh, yeah, man, how could I forget this part? So then, yeah, there's like a noise, like, like, like when you dent a soda can and pop it back out. But louder. There's a couple sounds like that. And someone screamed for the driver to stop. Crap, who was that? Oh, oh yeah, it was me. So I screamed for her to stop. And she did. And the kids. Some ran for the door. But I told them to get on the floor. Under their seats. And most of them did. Then I thought, Crcif, we should get out of here. Or did I yell it? Anyway, I yelled at the driver to drive away. But she was on the floor, too. Aaaaand. There were sirens. And a helicopter. And it happened really fast. But pretty soon there were cops and they came on the bus and got the kids off. And they tried to get me off. But, you know, I really didn't want to leave Tameka behind? So they had to kind of, pry me loose from her. Embarrassing, kind of. And then, well, that was kind of it. Except that there was a real mess in there, in the bus. Man, I had stuff all over me. Don't know how I got those clothes clean. No, that's right, Chev threw them out. And, what happened was there was some kind of thing, some thing on the street between some guys who had a beef with each other, never found out about what. So, bullets were exchanged. Obviously some hit the bus. So. That's what hit Tameka. That's why it was such a mess in there.

Aaaaanyway that's why I guess I don't like buses. Funny, right? That I'd forget something like that? So thanks, you know, for pushing the point, really digging into me and getting me to stir all that up. Because, you know, I clearly haven't been doing enough to keep people at arm's distance and it's a good reminder to me to tell you to get the fuck out of here.

--Web? Web, are you OK?

I looked at her from under the bed where I'd crawled and curled into a ball.

--GETTHEFUCKOUT!

And she did. And I felt tired. So I went to sleep.

TO KEEP HIM FROM CRUSHING MY SPINE

SPECIAL_IMAGE-record-204.JPG-REPLACE_ME

--Motherfucker!

I opened my eyes and looked up at the extremely pissed off giant standing over me holding one edge of the bed off the ground and threatening to stomp on my head.

--Motherfucker, are you high?

I shook my head, looked around the sun-filled office.

--No. What? No. I don't even do drugs.

He hefted the bed.

--Get the hell out of there before I drop this thing.

I scrambled out and stood in my T and underwear, jeans clutched in my hands.

--Urn.

Po Sin dropped the bed.

--Jesus, Web, what the hell?

I slid one leg into my jeans.

--No, I'm fine, I was just sleeping. I sleep a lot.

He shook his head.

--You sleep a lot? You sleep like the fucking dead, is what you do. I was yelling, running around yelling your name for five minutes. Saw you under the bed, I freaked out. Oh, shit, Web's fucked up. Almost had a heart attack. And I don't mean that figuratively.

He squinted at me.

--You sure you're not high?

I buttoned my fly and looked at him.

--Man, I smoked grass once when I was eleven and got so paranoid I thought the air was trying to kill me. Only time I

ever got high. I hate drugs. I never do drugs.

He licked his lips.

--OK. Fine. Then help me with something here.

He walked to the outer door and swung it open and pointed at the empty parking spot out back.

--Help me and tell me where the fuck my van is.

I took a step toward the door.

--I.I.I.

He nodded.

--Yeah, and when you figure out the answer to that one, you can tell me this.

He unballed one huge fist and showed me the pair of blue panties in his palm.

--Who the fuck do these belong to and why are they in my office?

The thing about getting beat up twice, spending big chunks of time cleaning up other people's blood, seeing your dad for the first time in two years, getting in a fight with your best friend, and having sex with someone you think you might really like a lot and then totally going psycho on her, all in a twenty-four-hour period, is that it's likely to affect your judgment. And if your judgment is pretty much for shit to start with, that may result in some spectacularly lame lies.

I'm not saying it's cool or anything.

I'm just saying that when I proceeded to tell Po Sin exactly what had happened that night, the fact that I left out the part where I drove to Carson to clean a bloody motel room and then brought one of his clients back to his office and had sex with her, just didn't seem relevant. I mean, nothing happened to the office while I was away, man. So why bother him with the information that I'd, you know, gone and used his equipment to sterilize a crime scene? And the van was clearly stolen while I was in the office asleep. That would have happened even if I'd spent the whole night here. And as for telling him the girl who'd come over to keep me company on a long lonely night was Soledad, well, that just would have required I tell him the rest of the story. And I just explained why that didn't matter.

So I streamlined things to make it easier for everyone involved.

But I digress.

--Stop lying to me, Web.

--I? What? Lying to you? I would never.

He took his face from his hands.

--Before you say anything else and really fuck up our relationship, let me tell you something about modern technology.

--Uh. OK.

He leaned back in his chair.

--Modern technology is an amazing thing. It allows us to do amazing things. Go to the moon. Cure disease. Watch TV. It also allows us to communicate over vast distances.

He reaches for the phone.

--And check our messages remotely.

He pressed a button on the phone.

Urn, hi, this is, uh, this is Soledad Nye. The woman in Malibu. You cleaned my dad's messi I mean, oh fuck, that was horrible. You cleaned the house. Anyway. I was hoping I could get in touch with one of your employees. Web. I wanted to talk to him about... anyway. My number, well, he should call me on my cell. The number. Hang on. Hello? Hello? Crap! Crap! Uh, Web?

Yeah, yeah, it's me. Oh fucking crap! Jesus. Are you OK?

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.

--Motherfucker!

--Didn't we already cover that?

Po Sin stopped hammering his desk and faced me.

--What?

--Nothing.

He put his hands on his knees and rose from his chair.

--Are you certain of that?

--Yeah.

He took a step.

--Because I'm just about positive I just heard the guy, the guy who had a female client, I expressly told him to stay away from, over here when he was on watch last night and played fuck games on the job till he passed out under the bed and my van was stolen, I think I just heard that guy make something like a joke. Am I mistaken? Because if I am not mistaken, I would take it very poorly.

--I.

The phone rang, cutting off whatever verbal strategy I might have mustered to keep him from crushing my spine.

Po Sin raised a finger.

--Hold that thought.

I wondered if he meant whatever I'd been about to say, or the thought that he was about to crush my spine. This leading to the sudden worry that perhaps he could read minds. Sleep deprivation, etc, having clouded my reasoning a bit.

Po Sin picked up the phone.

--Clean Team. What?

He looked at me, slitted his eyes.

--No. He is not.

He hung up the phone and pointed at it.

--Do you know what this is not for?

--Urn, I'm sorry, the structure of the question got me a little confused.

He raised a finger.

--We did just talk about what a bad fucking idea it would be for you to be making jokes at this moment, didn't we?

--Yeah, yeah we did.

--OK.

He pointed at the phone again.

--So, do you know what this is not for?

I shook my head, assuming this was one of those rhetorical things that would allow Po Sin to make a point and lead, soon after, to him chilling out a bit. I was right about part of that assumption.

He opened his mouth and a small hurricane wind blew out.

--It is not for your fucking personal use, motherfucker!

He made a fist, raised it high, brought it down slowly,

and rested it on top of my head.

--It is not for desperate young women to call you on, looking for comfort in the middle of the night, and it is not for your buddies to be calling on during business hours asking if you're around. Understood?

I tried to nod under the weight of his hand.

--Yeah. Totally. No personal calls.

He took his hand from my head.

--OK. Now. I, I'm a man. As evidence, I have a wife and a couple kids. I know all about screwing and how great it is. I also understand that when a chick calls you in the middle of the night and asks if she can come over, only a fucking corpse says no.

--Or a gay guy.

He made the fist again.

--Web! --Right. My bad.

He relaxed the fist. Sort of.

--Now I'm not saying you're off the hook. But, you know, I get it.

He brought up both hands, cupped my face in them, from crown to chin.

--As long as you were here, Web. As long as you were here when the van was stolen, I can understand. But if you guys were down the street messing around at the Stardust Lounge, or making a run for condoms or something, if you were not here as you were supposed to be, that is a very different matter. Yes? You do understand? You were here?

OK, this part here, I won't lie, this is bad. You might want to look away and not acknowledge the fact that I did what I did.

God knows I don't.

I brought up my hands and covered his.

--Po Sin, Yes. I understand. And I was here when the van was stolen.

True, every word. And, in an odd case of transmutation, also one of the worst lies of my life.

He took his hands from my face.

--OK. OK. Now. I need to, I need to start formulating a response to this act of aggression from Aftershock. You. You need to make yourself very fucking useful right now.

I looked around, saw a broom, grabbed it, looked at him.

He nodded.

--Yes. Start with that.

I started sweeping.

Gabe came to the open office door.

--Where's the van?

Po Sin brought his leg back and lashed it at the wastebasket and garbage exploded over the office and the tin basket hit the cinder-block wall and folded in half.

--Motherfucker! Motherfucking Morton looked us in the eyes and told us he'd agree to a cease-fire and then had one of his fucking peons come over here and rip us off! You were right! You were right on the fucking money, Gabe. That motherfucker cannot be trusted.

The garbage floated down to the floor.

Gabe watched it.

--Not like I'm happy about being right.

Po Sin stood in the middle of the trash.

--We'll have to do something about it.

--OK. Tonight?

Po Sin took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

--Lei has her yoga class tonight. I need to watch the kids.

Gabe nodded.

--OK, but better if we take care of it right away.

And he looked at me.

And Po Sin looked at me.

And I stopped sweeping trash.

--What?

Po Sin slipped his glasses back on.

--Got any plans? A pressing date with your new girl, maybe?

I bent and picked up the wastebasket and looked at the shape it had been twisted into when Po Sin booted it. It occurred to me that it was probably in better shape than my prospects of ever seeing Soledad again after my epic spazmatic display.

--No, I don't think that's gonna be a regular thing.

--All free, then? Not intending on another sleep marathon?

--No. I guess not.

He spread his arms.

--Then it's no problem?

--Urn, no? I mean, what?

--You can help Gabe out tonight.

--I can? Sure. I. To do?

Gabe tugged an earlobe.

--Nothing big. Just business communications.

I shook my head.

--I don't know, man. That sounds. I don't know.

Po Sin turned and looked out the open door and turned back and looked at me.

--Ahem.

I looked at the empty parking spot out there where his van wasn't parked and decided I should shut up and do as I was asked to do.

Gabe observed the silence for a moment, nodded his head.

--OK. So I'll pick you up tonight.

He turned to leave, turned back.

--Wear gloves.

And leave he did.

Po Sin walked through the door into the shop.

--Time to get your hands dirty, Web.

--Got a hug for Daddy?

Po Sin stuck out his index finger.

--Just a little one?

The twelve-year-old boy looked out from under his long bangs, raised a hand, extended his pinkie, and touched it to the tip of his father's finger.

Po Sin smiled.

--I love you.

The boy withdrew his finger and walked to a corner of the room and sat on the floor and wedged himself tight into the angle of the walls and put his backpack in his lap and squeezed it to his chest.

Po Sin pushed himself from his squat and looked at his wife in the doorway.

--What's the matter?

Lei came into the office, ruffling her spiky black hair.

--He lost a piece from his Bat Cave.

--Oh, Christ. At school? Please tell me it was at school.

She shook her head.

--Nope.

--Aw, shit.

She raised her hands.

--And I've already done what I can do about it.

--OK.

--You can take your best shot.

--OK.

--I'm just praying I can find some kind of mellow in yoga class and not fall asleep on my mat as soon as I get there.

--OK. OK.

She took a deep breath, exhaled.

--Sorry. Long one.

She looked at him and smiled.

--How about you, everything OK?

Po Sin scratched his moustache, waved a hand in the air over his head.

--Nothing's blowing up.

She pointed out the open door.

--Where's the van?

He glanced through the shop door at me where I was bleaching the slop sink, looked back at his wife.

--Gabe's out doing some pickups.

She looked where he had glanced, saw me, raised her eyebrows at Po Sin.

He pointed at me.

--Sorry. That's Web. Remember?

Her forehead creased, uncreased.

--Web. Yes, of course, I'm sorry.

She came through the door into the shop, hand held out.

--Nice to finally meet you.

I dropped my sponge in the sink and started to reach for her hand with one of mine, pulled up and stripped the thick rubber glove off.

--Hi. Nice to. Po Sin's said a lot about. Hi.

She took my sweaty hand; hers tiny and strong and cool.

--So he finally got you in here.

--Uh, yeah.

She kept my hand firmly in hers, looking up at me, smiling.

--He's been talking about it forever. Saying how he thinks you should be working.

Po Sin came to the door.

--Lei.

She waved her free hand over her shoulder.

--Shut up, Grandfather Elephant.

She touched the jade necklace that hung down over a loose orange cotton blouse.

--He'd just as soon no one knew he cares about anything, but he does. Of course.

--Lei!

--Ignore his bluster. He thinks I'm not minding my own business. How have you been? Are you feeling better? You're working here, you must be feeling better. Not spending all your time slacking at your friend's tattoo shop. Good, that's good for you.

--Jesus, Lei.

She tugged on my hand, pulled me a step closer, put a hand to her mouth for a stage whisper.

--I'm embarrassing him. Being overly personal with someone I've just met. He hates it.

--He has work to do, Lei.

Still holding my hand, she turned.

--You have work to do.

She tilted her head toward their son tucked in the corner, clutching his bag.

He slapped the back of his neck.

--I know, I know. Where is she?

--She's out in the car.

He started for the door.

--I'll get her. Just let Web do his work, OK? I don't pay him enough to get grilled by you.

He stepped out the door.

--Xing. Xing, over here. Now. Now. No, I will not carry you. Now, I said. No, you are perfectly capable of walking on your own two feet. Now. Now! Damn it.

He walked out of sight.

Lei turned back to me.

--I'm not a Hindu, Web, but I swear I must have done something in a previous life to deserve my daughter.

She nodded her head.

--I know, I know, it's my own fault, our own fault. She's ours after all. She didn't just appear out of thin air. We made love, we made a baby. One baby wasn't enough. We had to go back to the well for more. So we got what we deserved. And with all Yong's problems, beautiful boy that he is, she doesn't get all the attention she maybe deserves.

She leaned close.

--What she deserves is a good whack on the ass from time to time, but Po Sin won't allow it.

She leaned back.

--Of course, I'd be terrified to try it myself. Have you ever seen Demon Seed

Table of Contents

Start